

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# PARIAH

A BEQUIN NOVEL

DAN ABNETT



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**For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind. By the might of His inexhaustible armies a million worlds stand against the dark.**

**Yet, He is a rotting carcass, the Carrion Lord of the Imperium held in life by marvels from the Dark Age of Technology and the thousand souls sacrificed each day so that His may continue to burn.**

**To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. It is to suffer an eternity of carnage and slaughter. It is to have cries of anguish and sorrow drowned by the thirsting laughter of dark gods.**

**This is a dark and terrible era where you will find little comfort or hope. Forget the power of technology and science. Forget the promise of progress and advancement. Forget any notion of common humanity or compassion.**

**There is no peace amongst the stars, for in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.**

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*The first section of the story,  
which is called*

## QUEEN MAB

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# CHAPTER 1

*In which I make myself known*

This, I think, will be my life story, and it will start here. You will not learn much from me, or you will learn everything. I have not yet decided which.

I know one thing, and that is that my life has too many stories within it. It is made out of stories, like a rope is wound from smaller strands, or a mosaic is made of little coloured tiles. I am made of stories. I must leave many of them out, otherwise the one that matters will not make a bit of sense. Some day, if I am alive, I might be persuaded to tell some of the stories I have omitted. But they are lies and fabulations and, anyway, I do not expect to live.

My family's name was Bequin, and this is the name I have always used when I am being myself. I was given to understand that proof of this heritage could be found in a marshland cemetery, for my family was a marshland family, but I never thought to check this, or visit the gravestone. This, I realise, makes me seem foolishly trusting. I am not. Besides, if I had seized, one day, upon the notion of taking a holloway down to Toilgate and entering the marsh beyond, I am sure that a gravestone would have been waiting for me in the waterlogged plot when I arrived, flecked with the lichen of ages though it had not stood there the previous sunset.

It is said that I am very like my mother. That I was raised an orphan means that I cannot corroborate this either.

My status as an orphan explains my situation. I was a ward of the city from a very young age, brought to the Scholam Orbus on Highgate Hill and raised there, and then transferred on my twelfth birthday to the Maze Undue, whose rambling accommodations adjoined the scholam. This was

due to my selection as a promising candidate. Most of the scholam's wards left the school and went down to the city when they turned twelve and were legally old enough to work. Promising candidates, one or two every few years, were transferred to the Maze Undue. I had, therefore, lived all of the life I could remember there on the hill, in one leaky, draughty building, or the other backing onto it.

My name is Beta Bequin. The forename is an affectionate contraction of my full name, *Alizebeth*, and not an uncial label. It is said aloud with a long vowel as in *Bay-tar*, not as *Beater* or *Better*.

I was found wandering in the marsh as a very young child by a kindly stranger, and upon investigation it was revealed that my mother had passed away of a distemper. The air of the marshes is noisome, and can afflict the lungs.

If the city is not familiar to you, then let me tell you something about it. The marshes I spoke of are to the south, far to the south, beyond the crumbling bulk of Toilgate where the workers once passed to and from the shipyards. This was in the olden times. Sister Bismillah told me about it when I was a girl. By the time I lived there the shipyards were derelict, just rockcrete sheds of immense size standing at intervals along the old river slipway. The lands had been partly reclaimed, or conquered, by the water, turning them into a grey and misty flatness of wet trees and low, impoverished dwellings. To the west of the city, past Highgate, lay the mountains, which were only ever referred to as the Mountains, and to the north-east, beyond the grim structure of Coalgate, lay the emptied space, the great Sunderland, whose grey dusts, I was told, eventually give way to the scorched harrat of the Crimson Desert.

The city is called Queen Mab. It is in the prefecture of Hercula, in the south part of the world, which is named Sancour, which itself is in the subsector of Angelus. Queen Mab was once very mighty and important, the mightiest city in the world, and its splendid towers and conspicuous gates were the envy of all other cities in the world, and on many other worlds besides. War made it mighty. But the war ended, and Queen Mab was left spent and exhausted. For as long as I have known it, and far longer than that besides, the city has been in its dotage. It is forever ailing and weak; it is worn out and withering. Many parts of it are crumbling, and there are some parts that are so decayed that no one dares visit them for fear of dislodging a wall or a ragged roof with no more force than the sound of footsteps. The

city has always been an old place, with damp around its feet and dust in its mouth and a cold wind off the mountains at its shoulder. From my early childhood, I rose up through it. Sister Bismillah often said I floated up, from the lowest, wettest part, all the way to Highgate Hill. I remarked to her that this made me a strong swimmer.

She suggested this simply made me familiar with the function of metaphor.

When I was twelve, and not one day more, I entered the Maze Undue, and began my private instruction by the fourth, unspoken branch of the worshipful Ordos. I was selected for this because of certain aspects of my humour, which Mentor Saur referred to as my *temper*.

I entered the Maze Undue, and the whole city of Queen Mab became my classroom.

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## CHAPTER 2

### *Which is of likenesses*

There was a quizzing glass in the top room of the Maze Undue, in which we could reflect upon those souls who, unwittingly, were going to teach us. We read their lives in it in preparation. I only cared to use the quizzing glass when Mam Mordaunt or the Secretary were present. They were the most senior of the Maze Undue's four mentors. We could use the glass at other times, even unsupervised, but I never cared to. The glass was unsettling. I saw things in it that I did not wish to see.

I had a mirror in my room, a hand mirror with a wooden frame. You could not quiz in it, and so I preferred it, because it showed only me. I think the mentors would have confiscated it if they had known it existed. The only mirrors we were supposed to use were the quizzing glass, and the full-length mirrors, old and silvered, that stood in the robing room.

My hand mirror was the only thing that did not lie to me. I could see my face in it. I saw black hair, shoulder-length, and a good nose. I had a good nose, a nose of character. My mouth was not particularly full, or possessed of ripe lips like some powdered manzel of worth in a romance portrait, but it was mobile, and most engaging when it was at its most up- or down-tilted. I often pulled these expressions in the mirror, so I knew them. My frown could be alarming, and could spur people into apology. My grin, with teeth exposed, was equally compelling. My eyes were dark and quite large.

I was tall, taller than Corlam or Mentor Murlees, almost as tall as Mam Mordaunt, who I grew up thinking of as a tall woman, and I had a slender build because I maintained a trained condition. I did not know if I was attractive to men or women as Beta Bequin, because that did not matter, nor

had it ever been tested. I knew I could be attractive to men and women in circumstances when I was *not* being Beta Bequin, and that was the point.

The Maze Undue was a school. The Ordos established it in Queen Mab a long time ago, as a discreet place in which to conduct the unremarked-upon training of remarkable people. There are, I presume, many others like it in other cities on other worlds. There would have to be, wouldn't there?

It was not a school like the Scholam Orbus. That was a home for foundlings, instituted to clothe and feed, at the city's expense, lost waifs, and teach them their letters, their numbers, and a sufficient measure of the Ecclesiarchy's texts. To earn a place in the Scholam Orbus, one simply had to lack a family.

To earn a place in the Maze Undue, one needed to be selected. We entered, usually singly, never more than two from any batch of foundlings. I never knew there to be more than twenty students.

The Maze Undue had been, for a long time, a theatre or playhouse, because the remains of an arched stage still stood in the hall we used as a refectory, and in the undercroft there were traces of stage trapdoors and vaults for technical apparatus such as lights, scenery flats and winches. The building's chequered past as a playhouse also explained how the robing room came to be so full of costumes and props.

But it had no more always been a playhouse than I had always been an orphan, or a street messenger, or a mamzel's chambermaid, or a rubricator's assistant, or a shipping merchant's lifeward, or any of the other things I have temporarily been.

It was, I think, originally, a place of worship. A clandestine place of worship, raised by one of the old cults of Queen Mab, sponsored by a rich merchant or landowner who found spiritual alternatives to the rigid Imperial Cult inviting. This was before the war.

I guessed this from the name. *Maze Undue*. I was studying texts of Old Terra, *Ancient Terra* in fact, works kept in the data stacks of the Maze Undue's library. Some of these works were pre-Imperial, and dated back to the time of the Great Crusade, the Unification, even to Old Night and the Age of Technology. They were often written in the languages of these epochs, and I swiftly gained a competency in Old Franc, enough to get by. I have an aptitude for languages. I believe it is an eidetic skill. My aptitude is one of the reasons I am writing this in the impoverished colloquial Enmabic, the argot of Queen Mab's streets, rather than in Low Gothic,



because no one uses Enmabic any more, and thus very few who find this will be able to understand it.

Anyway, I mentioned to Mentor Murlees, who is the savant and librarian of the house mentors, that Maze Undue could easily be a corruption of the Old Franc phrase *maison dieu*, or 'house of god'.

Mentor Murlees was not very old, but he was extremely frail. He spent much of his time in a walking chair, though he was able to stand. He was no more than ten years older than me. He had a truly eidetic mind, one that made my talents in that direction pale into insignificance. Anything he saw, he learned. His head was full of data, all instantly absorbed, all instantly recallable. I sometimes thought his mind was responsible for his frailty, as if supporting so much data, so much mental power and knowledge, robbed his body of vigour and nourishment.

When I told him my supposition, he smiled at the thought of it and nodded.

'Indeed, there is no maze, Beta,' he said.

He was wrong, as it turned out, but not the way he might have supposed.

The playhouse or *maison* or whatever it was when stone was first laid on stone, faced the dusty north-east on the top of Highgate Hill, and all the panes of windowglass that looked in that direction were permanently begrimed with desert soot, the grey murk of the Sunderland. Acids and other elemental agues had eaten away the stone and pecked out parts of the roof. Portions of the site were no longer fit for habitation. Rain and moonlight dripped down through broken ceilings. Corridors and floorboards were damp with rainwater and smelled of old cupboards. If it had originally been a temple, then the temple-ers who crafted it perhaps built what is now the Scholam Orbus as a companion faith school. The orphanage faced west and north, confronting – from the edge of the Highgate Hill crag – the black threat of the mountains. It blunted, too, the worst of the northern weather, insulating the Maze Undue from the worst of the winters that came knifing south each year.

The buildings leant together for support, stone pile against stone pile, and had seeped into each other. They were knocked through in obvious places: in courtyards and walkways. They were linked in secret ways too, secret ways only inquisitive urchins could find after curfew. Common attic spaces and mutual cellars made it harder to discern, in modern times, where one building ended and the other began.

Each one of us – the candidates, as we were known – had his or her own room. When I turned twenty-four, I was one of the three oldest still in residence. The other candidates, eight of them at that time, ranged in age from twenty-two to thirteen. The year before, there had been two others older than me, Corlam and Faria, but they had left. They had been selected for service and transferred. We never saw them again, nor expected to. Twenty-six or twenty-seven years old seemed to be about the age when one finished one's training and graduated.

We never saw any candidates after they left the Maze Undue, except Judika.

So, we had our own rooms. Then there was the top room for briefing, the robing room, the refectory, washrooms, private quarters for the four mentors and a staff room, the library (which was actually an amalgam of four rooms), and the locker and the skirts, which were Mentor Saur's province. The locker was a sturdy chamber in the basement where Saur kept the weapons and instruments. The door, like many in the building (staff room and private quarters especially) was a pain door, and worked according to the settings of our cuffs.

I must remember to explain about the cuffs.

The skirts were our term for the outlying and largely ruined parts of the Maze Undue along the eastern wing, where physical training and combat practice took place. These were several rooms and several floors, a dead space not safe for use otherwise. One large chamber in the skirts, near to the locker, was weatherproofed and lit, and functioned as our most regular training room. We called this the drill.

It was in the drill, during my twenty-third year, that I first saw a man die close up. And, in the main, he died because of me.

# CHAPTER 3

*In which I digress to recount the death*

Let me tell it, now that I think of it. Frankly, I think of it often, for it shocked me and left a mark. His death affected the development of my character, so I consider it worth recording, though I appreciate that it was part of a greater story. Thus it is worth recording *in any case* according to the rationale that I set to decide which stories should be included here and which are surplus.

I didn't realise it at the time. At the time, it was just a shocking thing.

I was twenty-three. It was late in the day, getting dark. It was summer, though even summer was murky in Queen Mab, and the twilight that settled on the Maze Undue was always ugly. I had gone down to the locker to fetch a laspistol to practise with. Some bottles on a wall, that was all I intended. Mentor Saur had been critical of my marksmanship, saying that I lacked the hit rate of Corlam and Faria, and even (*to think!*) Roud, who was just fifteen. Also, I had just clumsily finished a function in the Iron Quarter where it would have been useful to shoot better. I had gone— no. That story is certainly surplus here. I needed to practise my pistol shooting. That is what matters.

I had seen people die. Let's be clear. Queen Mab is a violent city. I had seen fights. I had seen deaths. I had been obliged to draw or improvise weapons to defend myself and others. I had inflicted injury. It is entirely possible I had caused wounds that had led to death, or that my stray shots had, on occasion, slain some wretch that I wasn't aware of.

But I had not seen death like this.

The drill was lit. The Maze Undue was generally lighted by wick lamps

and candles, and by old glow-globes embedded in the ceiling panels. The globes were stained yellow with age, and hissed when they burned. In some hallways, we left out sticks or mop handles to strike the roof and jar them back into luminescence as required.

The drill was lit. Glow-globes shone like sickly suns. I went in to ask Mentor Saur to re-set my cuff so I could bypass the pain door and take a pistol from the locker.

The drill was lit. I heard grunts of exertion, and thought Mentor Saur might be honing his blade craft. I didn't know of any candidates who would be training with him.

But he was fighting with someone.

They were fighting on the secondary ring, a canvas stage beside, and slightly below, the main sparring ring with its wooden railings. To the left were the practice dummies, and a row of pavis shields and ceramite bucklers hanging on pegs. To the right were the two mechanical sparring machines, switched off and dormant, limbs raised and frozen like rearing spiders.

I saw drops of blood flecked on the wooden railings, and a small pool tracked in a smear across the canvas of the secondary ring, like a guilty red arrow pointing to them, and I realised it wasn't a sparring session.

The man was breathing hard. He was blond and fairly young, and—

No. Saur first. Saur is more important in this story, and I realise I have done little more than mention his name so far.

Mentor Saur. Thaddeus Saur. Teacher of combat craft and measures of defence. He was tall and bulky, owning the mass of a fighter. He was a daunting man, and I always thought of him as solid, compacted, as if he were wrought from a denser material than normal people, like that of a neutron star. He had a face like a cliff, clean-shaven, the skin coarse. His mouth was an axe groove, his nose a flattened stump. His eyes were small and heavy-lidded, as if they had evolved to protect themselves, like the eyes of a crocodilian. He was all function: shaved, clipped, trimmed and undecorated, but his hair was a thick crown of white that hung down over his brow and ears. It was not a distinguished silver-white, like an elder statesman. It was yellow-white and lustreless, like parched straw or dirty snow. His teeth were small, and he had no little finger on his left hand. Until I met Deathrow, he was the most physically intimidating man I had ever known.

I had no idea of his age. He was old, a veteran of military service. He had a slight paunch, but that was just the inexorable spread of maturity rather than a lack of fitness. He was brutally strong and viciously fast. As ever, he was dressed in an armoured bodyglove, boots and gauntlets, all oxblood red - his working clothes.

So, the other man. He was younger and slighter, blond, plainly good-looking in a well-bred way. He was wearing the garb of an Enmabic merchantman – boots and breeches, heavy wool under-robcs, and a winter coat of some quality, its collar raised and lined with gezl fur – but I knew at once that this was a disguise. He was dressed the way someone would dress if he had made a close and considered study of Queen Mab's merchant classes in order to pass as one.

I do not know what small detail betrayed this to me, but I knew it in a second. Perhaps it was because I have essayed similar feats of disguise very many times, for function after function. His disguise was not imperfect, I felt. It was instead *too* perfect.

They were fighting with short swords. Mentor Saur was brandishing the thick, twin-edged *cutro* he always kept at his side. His opponent, the stranger, should not have been any kind of match for him, in terms of bulk or skill or speed. But he was holding his own. In fact, he was doing better than that. Saur always carried a snub autopistol in the back of his belt, and I saw that weapon lying on the floor quite some distance away from them. Saur's right forearm was cut behind the wrist, and the bodyglove sleeve was sliced open and flapping.

He had drawn first, and been disarmed by a sword-thrust. It had only become a blade duel when Saur had been deprived of his pistol.

The stranger was wielding a curved *salinter* or short sabrc, which I presumed he had brought with him. It was not a local weapon, not even local to the world. He knew how to use it. Besides the disarming wound, he had nicked Saur on the cheek and the left shoulder.

Saur was going for the face each time. From practice bouts, I knew this to be his way. It is a particularly invasive approach, and can provoke rash reactions that lead to failures of technique. One is hard-wired to guard one's face, one's eyes. To focus the attack there forces the opponent to fight not only you, but his own autonomic responses as well. Saur was trying to undermine the stranger's technical control.

He was failing.

I thought that was remarkable. No one beat Saur, not in any form of combat. Then I thought, almost simultaneously, why? Why are they fighting? Why is this man here? Blood had been drawn. This was no practice session, no combat lesson for a private client.

They were fighting in earnest.

The speed of the exchanged blows was ferociously rapid. The stranger was putting everything through his blade and defending with deft footwork, opening the space when he could, staying side-on to minimise his profile as a target. Saur was trying to keep it tight, trying to close the reach, deflecting the stranger's thrusts with his sword and the metal bands stitched into the forearm of his left sleeve. He maintained a face-on stance so he could play in both sword and armoured sleeve.

Saur was dogged. He started to use his armoured sleeve as an offensive weapon, occupying the stranger's sword so he could lunge in with his *cutro*. When he jabbed, I thought he had killed the stranger right away, because the short sword's edge sliced through the man's chest.

But the stranger rotated and came away fast, cutting down and back with his *salinter* to deter Saur's follow-through. I saw that the stranger's very fine winter coat had been cut open, so that the left lapel lolled away, and the robe beneath was sliced too. I glimpsed, beneath that, the wire mesh of an armoured bodyglove. The stranger was not as soft as he looked.

Saur was, perhaps, dismayed to discover that the stranger was discreetly armoured. His killing blow would have been so sure, otherwise. He fumbled slightly, trying to reposition, trying not to lose the upper hand.

The stranger caught him across the side of the head.

I heard the crack of metal on flesh, the sound of an axe smacking a ripe tuber. Saur's head was snapped aside, his body rotating after it. Blood flew. It was in his dirty white hair. He crashed backwards into the railings of the upper ring, and knocked over a spit bucket. He half-fell, yet somehow kept his feet, but he was done. The stranger followed in, the *salinter* going for the throat while his opponent's guard was dropped.

You have to remember the speed. You have to appreciate, as I tell you this, that virtually no time at all had passed since I first entered the room and saw them fighting. Three, four seconds: enough time for them to trade two dozen blows. I had come in with just enough time to grasp the basic situation and see Saur fall.

I never liked Thaddeus Saur. It's safe to say my feelings towards the cruel



bastard were stronger and more negative than that. But he was of the Maze Undue, and so was I, and this could not be permitted.

I started forwards. I shouted out a great cry, and snatched a buckler from the pegs. My cuff was turned to *dead*, so the force of my bluntness came with me and my shout.

It can be like a slap to have a pariah come at you, aggressive, unlimited. To even a non-sensitive, a regular human, the psyskic null of a blank mind can be disturbing, if only fleetingly.

The stranger recoiled. It was enough of a surprise to stop him cutting out Saur's throat. My interruption wasn't going to stop there. I hurled the buckler like a discus.

The small, circular shield missed him, but he was obliged to duck. Saur was far from finished. He kicked out, savagely, and caught the stranger on the inside of his thigh with his heel, throwing the man sideways, clumsily.

The stranger landed, hands on the canvas, but was ready as Saur propelled himself forward and kicked the mentor's legs away. Saur slammed onto his back.

I was, all this time, still running at him. I turned the run into a flying kick.

He rolled under me, flat to the floor, and sprang up as I landed and turned.

I think he wanted to say something to me, but he didn't know what. Perhaps he wanted to tell me to flee, to back away from a fight I had no part in, but he couldn't. If he wanted Saur dead, he had to kill me too, or the whole house would come down on his head.

I could sense his conflict. Unarmed as I was, I drove at him, using his reluctance against him. Fighting Saur was one thing, but he didn't want to engage a young woman. His response was half-hearted. He tried to shove me away. He tried to spare me his blade, though it was still in his hand. I think he hoped to clip me with the hilt or pommel and perhaps knock me out.

I would not let him off so easily. I grasped his wrist, turned it and, with my other hand, punched the pressure point in his upper arm.

The *salinter* flew out of his deadened fingers.

'Who are you?' I demanded.

He rammed me aside with both hands. I staggered and fell, knocking down a rack of wooden exercise staves.

I got up, gripping one stave and kicking the others out of my way. The stranger was backing away from me, his hands up.

I think he intended to cut his losses and flee.

He doubled up as Saur's *cutro* tore into him from behind. The short sword went through his coat, through his robes, through his under-jack and mesh, and sliced into his waist. Saur ripped the blade free, and blood squirted out across the canvas. The stranger stumbled away, his head wobbling like a drunkard's, his feet unsure, his eyes confused. He had both hands clamped to his waist, but even tight together, they could not plug the hole in him. Blood poured out, like red wine from a jug. His hands and sleeves were soaked with it.

His mouth opened and closed, without managing to form words.

He fell down on his back. Saur just stood there, watching him bleed out, the bloodied *cutro* low at his side.

Blood formed a huge, dark red mirror on the canvas around the stranger. The mirror crept out. Blood soaked his coat and robes, covered his hands, and flecked his face. He stared at the ceiling, his mouth fluttering open and shut, his legs twitching.

I bent over him.

Perhaps he didn't have to die, I thought. We could hold him, bind his injury, call for the city watch. I tried to apply pressure to his ghastly wound, but it was open, and as big as a dog's mouth. My hands were no better at stemming the flow of blood than his had been.

He suddenly, finally, saw me instead of the ceiling and the lights. He blinked, refocused. Tiny beads of blood had lodged in his eyelashes.

'What is this? Who are you?' I asked.

He said a word. It came out of him like a gasp, more breath than sound.

It was a word I had not heard before.

He said, 'Cognitae.'

There was a bang, right in my ear, and it made me jump because it was sudden and close and painfully loud. A bark of pressure clouted me along with the noise. I flinched as bloody backspatter hit my face, throat and chest. I had his blood in my eyes.

Mentor Saur put another round through the stranger's face for good measure, and then holstered his snub pistol.

# CHAPTER 4

*Which concerns Thaddeus and the dead man*

I looked down at myself, at the quantity of blood upon me, and instinctively raised my hands to my face. My fingertips came away smeared in more blood. It was all over me.

‘Go get washed,’ Saur said.

I looked up at him, still kneeling.

‘Do as I said,’ Saur ordered.

‘Who was he?’ I asked.

His lip curled slightly.

‘You heard him say it,’ he said.

‘But—’

He turned away from me and cursed.

‘Turn your cuff live, for fug’s sake,’ he said.

I did so. I clicked the centre band of the metal cuff around to activate my limiter and mask my blankness. The pariah effect makes us hard to like or sympathise with.

He knew it. The moment the limiter was on again, he visibly softened. Just a touch, for Thaddeus Saur was never soft.

‘You did me a turn there, girl,’ he murmured. ‘Bastard nearly had me.’

I nodded.

‘His technique was certainly very good,’ I said, ‘but I think you would have recovered, mentor. You were at an angle to parry, and then low enough to hit his groin.’

‘Maybe,’ he said.

‘Certainly. Femoral artery.’

‘Maybe,’ he repeated.

‘I think so,’ I said. I was just talking, perhaps a little faster than I usually do. I was compensating for the adrenaline spike.

‘Do you know him?’ I asked.

Saur shook his head.

‘I found him in here, and he went for me.’

I started to search inside the man’s coat and robes. I tried not to look at what remained of his head.

‘Leave that,’ said Saur. ‘He’s a mess.’

‘I am already a mess,’ I replied. ‘He may have identification. What did you mean, I heard him say it?’

‘The word he spoke,’ said Saur, ‘that’s what he was. Cognitae. Heretic filth. Now leave, Bequin, you’ve done your part.’

But I had already found something in the stranger’s inside coat pocket, and pulled it out. It was a wallet, leather, quite heavy. I rose to my feet and opened it.

The polished rosette crest inside was unmistakable, even though blood had found its way inside the wallet too and speckled the silver.

‘He is Ordo,’ I said, confused.

‘No,’ said Saur.

‘Ordo Hereticus,’ I insisted. ‘Look at this. The name is given as Voriet, and the rank is interrogator.’

He took it from me, snatched it in fact.

‘He’s not Ordo,’ Saur said.

‘But—’

‘Impersonation, you dull-witted witch. If your function is to infiltrate an Ordo training facility, what else do you pretend to be?’

I nodded.

‘So that’s a fake?’ I asked, pointing to the rosette in his hand with a jerk of my chin.

‘Of course.’

‘You’re sure, mentor?’

‘I can show you a real one, if you want to compare.’

‘No,’ I said.

He put the wallet in his thigh pouch and looked around for something to place over the corpse. Blood matted the white hair on the side of Saur’s head. The stranger’s blow had been glancing, but scalps bleed a lot.

‘Go get washed,’ he said. ‘The tap by the locker. Splash yourself down so you don’t track blood into the house. Then run for Mam Mordaunt. Tell her I need her here.’

‘Yes, sir,’ I said. I glanced down at the body again.

‘This is what the... the Cognitae do, is it? They infiltrate—’

He glared at me.

‘I don’t really see how that’s any of your concern, do you?’ he asked. ‘Get on it.’

Though the Secretary was the most senior of the Maze Undue’s four mentors, Mam Mordaunt ran the house.

Her name was Eusebe dea Mordaunt, but we all called her Mam, a respectful contraction of the formal *mamzel*. She was housekeeper, and the logistical running of the Maze Undue fell to her. She was also our surrogate mother.

In most instances, she was a step-mother, and a distant one at that. Occasionally, a more maternal fondness could be glimpsed.

This was one of those times. When I fetched her, she expressed concern for my welfare, and said I could be counselled if necessary.

I was, by then, more exhilarated by the event, and intrigued. The trauma would sink in later to leave a lasting mark.

Mam Mordaunt was tall and quite beautiful, though it was impossible to gauge her true age. She wore pale powder so that her face resembled a mask, rouged her lips, painted on arched eyebrows in stark black ellipses and drew kohl around her eyes, so that she reminded me of a haughty queen in an ancient Grekan tragedy. Her black hair was always braided back off her face. Her gowns were floor-length and black. They were woven from the finest spider-silk. She never really smiled.

‘You did well, Beta,’ she said afterwards. ‘He was a cruel assassin, and might have killed us all.’

I never saw what they did with the body and, to my knowledge, the city watch was never called. I did, shortly thereafter, overhear Mam Mordaunt say to Saur that they must be on their guard for ‘others’, a comment I took to refer to the incident.

It was not mentioned again, except by Mam Mordaunt, when she asked me once more later if I had been bothered by the experience. She stroked my hair, which was something she did to signify maternal involvement. There

was no tenderness in it. To me, it did little more than remind me that her hand was always on us.

‘Don’t mention this to the other candidates,’ she said. ‘I do not want to unsettle them.’

I could be trusted to do this. I was used to not mentioning things.

‘If you have any questions or concerns,’ she said, ‘bring them to me or the Secretary in confidence.’

Her hand rested on the side of my face, and she looked at me the way a mother would look at a daughter who fondly brought to mind her youthful self.

At least, I think that’s what the look was supposed to evoke in me.

They kept me very busy for a while after that. Within a day, I had a new function to perform.

They wanted me too busy to dwell on it.

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# CHAPTER 5

## *Concerning the functions as performed by candidates*

The city of Queen Mab was, as I have said, our classroom. During a candidate's training at the Maze Undue, his or her interface with the many, complex social niches of city life came to hone the abilities required for espial and infiltration.

I suppose that is why Queen Mab was chosen as the location of the Maze Undue. It was, eternally, a perplexing and gaudy metropolis, quite intoxicating in its variety and business.

The range of *functions*, as we called them, varied broadly, but at heart their nature was always the same. That nature was deceit.

To begin, Mam Mordaunt or the Secretary would brief us on the role that we were required to play. Our preparatory work often involved remote viewing of the subject via the quizzing glass in the top room, and even, sometimes, shadowing them in the streets. Mentor Murlees would acquaint us with aspects of custom and language that would assist us, and Mam Mordaunt would coach our deportment and help us to assemble our disguises in the robing room. Mentor Saur would finesse any defensive or offensive technique we might require, and then the Secretary himself would review our finished role and refine it before sending us out along the holloways to get on with our business.

We were obliged to pose as people, to play-act, to pretend. We took on roles, immersed ourselves in other personalities, so we could get close to various target citizens in the great city without them realising they were being gulled. Often, a function came with a nominal task: enter the household of merchant T\_\_\_\_\_ and learn the combination to his

strongbox; work in the court of Mamzel R\_\_\_\_\_ and bring back a single pearl button from her finest astarish gown; penetrate the manufactory of the industrialist F\_\_\_\_\_ and discover the name of his off-world brokers; serve as a waiter at the Telthea Dining House on the Ludovic Ambular, and listen in when Duke H\_\_\_\_\_ next came to supper in order to learn the private pet-name he had for his new mistress.

Sometimes these tasks seemed essentially pointless. A mistress' pet-name? The secret ingredient of a baker's famous confectionary? The number of minutes slow a particular old clock ran in a particular private reading room? They were, I knew, just tasks for the sake of tasks. Sometimes functions dispensed with them entirely: then it was simply how long could one pass one's self off as someone else, and how far could one get, before discovery – and flight – became necessary.

Each function was a contest, a challenge, and the longer one lasted, the better one had performed.

'If you can, with a little modest preparation, pass anywhere within Queen Mab and learn anything,' the Secretary told us, 'then you can pass anywhere outside Queen Mab.'

We were learning to be actors. Liars, in fact, because convincing liars are all that actors are, ultimately. We were learning to become other people to such a degree we could get lost in the part. Before anyone else could believe, we had to believe.

I enjoyed it, for the most part. I enjoyed the challenge. There was rivalry between the candidates, usually friendly. Sometimes, if a candidate had to abort a function early, another would be sent in to do better. We learned from each other which disguises worked, and which did not. We shared experience-derived tips about body language and micro-expression control, minute details that enhanced a performance and helped to convince a subject.

My favourite part of preparation was the robing room. The Maze Undue's theatrical legacy had left it packed with costumes. When a function was handed to me, and my role was determined, I rushed away to select the disguise that would help me get into the part. The robing room never disappointed me. No matter what outlandish guise I lit upon, I would find the constituent parts of the apparel I had in mind hanging somewhere on the robing room's rails. It was almost uncanny, though I suspect Mam Mordaunt kept the wardrobe supplemented with clothing and props that

might be called for.

I think of the month I spent in the mansion house of the Marquis Saintwyrn in the traverse avenues below Feygate. He supposed me, on first sight, to be the tutor of figurative art, engaged to teach his eldest daughter. Corlam had very much wanted this function, and a very fine figure he would have cut as a young private tutor in a sober black suit and a wide-brimmed hat. I dare say the daughter might even have fallen for her handsome teacher. But I could paint and draw much better than he could, so the function came to me. By the end of the month, I had discovered precisely which congenital allergy affected the Saintwyrn line, an allergy the private kitchens and chefs worked scrupulously to avoid. A fatal weakness, of most exploitable use, I suppose, to assassins or blackmailers, was now the currency of the Maze Undue. The marquis, his family, and his vast industrial empire were now critically vulnerable to a piece of leverage eked out during a lesson in paint washes with a talkative, unguarded girl.

I think, too, of functioning as a junior sartor in the palace of the Silver Countess. You'll have heard of the Silver Countess, I'm sure. One of the most powerful figures in Queen Mab's noble class, and rumoured to be one of the few people to have the ear and support of the mysterious Yellow King. She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw, and I only ever saw her from a distance. Her gowns – resplendent in every way – were the most ambitious and elaborate in the city, nay the world. So ridiculously luxurious and costly were they, the countess' chamberlain kept them in a wardrobe annex as secure as a banking house's vault, under the care of the Keeper of the Wardrobe and his staff of junior sartors. Every dress and garment was catalogued and inspected when it came off her body, every fibre checked, any minute wear repaired. Garments were cleaned, often with abstruse methods, and every single gem, ostrich feather, ivory clasp or jewelled element adorning the gowns was removed, one by one, checked against a ledger, and returned to the wardrobe store. Sometimes it took us a whole day to select, sign out, and attach all the jewels afforded to a particular dress, and then another day to disassemble the outfit and retire it, checking each last gem back in. If a single gem went missing, the name of the last person to handle it was always recorded. Junior sartors had been removed – I think, perhaps, even executed – for such failures of care.

I took a jewel, a green garnet the size of an almond, attached to a gold hoop, and I never gave it back. The Silver Countess and her Master of

Wardrobe never noticed its absence, however. Another green garnet hangs in its place on those folds of black crepe silk these days, this one, however, has a vox transmitter device wired into it.

I also think of Corodatus, the Ironmaster, the keeper and teller of his own stories. I served him too, on one function, in his verdigrised ruin of a palace below Coalgate. He was another mystery I learned about thanks to a function.

I realise these are stories I need not tell. They are simply exemplars.

I will tell a story that is pertinent instead. The story of the function of the Blackwards, and of Deathrow, and of Sister Bismillah's new sister. The story where my stories begin to wind tighter.

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# CHAPTER 6

## *On the harrowed paths*

It was about a year, a little over perhaps, after the intruder had died in the drill. The incident had not been mentioned again, and neither had the Cognitae. I had been worked hard, though I felt that Mam Mordaunt and the Secretary were both keeping a solicitous eye upon me. I was almost twenty-five.

A function was announced. I was selected, beyond Faria and Corlam, and even Maphrodite, who was excelling by then. The emporium house of the Blackwards had to be penetrated. Information was required.

Once prepared for the function – a process which took some two or three days – I set out, following, as always, the city's holloways to reach my destination.

Queen Mab, if you do not know it, is criss-crossed with an irregular scheme of holloways or harrowed paths. They are sacred ways, streets of the vast city that are distinguished because they felt the actual step of Saint Orphaeus when he trod upon this world during his pilgrimage of grace many centuries ago. This was when he had returned from the empyrean of heaven, and brought its gift of fire back with him. Those streets wherein he passed were closed off as blessed tracts, harrowed by his passing, and the folk of Queen Mab avoid their sanctity. They have become, simply, the place of the destitute and the warblind.

The holloways bisect the city so they serve to divide it into many compartments. Two such quarters may exhibit very different characters, though they are only separated by a single street (admittedly, a street where no one walks). In places, bridges and tunnels have been established to

traverse the holloways where to go around would take too long.

I have always liked the holloways. The streets, and the properties that line them, are as they were left, and as time has worn them. They are silent and dusty, almost all colour gone and flaked, sanded down by centuries of weather. Through fogged glass, one can glimpse rooms that look as though the occupants have just stepped out, in the middle of lunch or a game of cards. Shops still display, through cobwebbed panes, the faded residue of their wares.

Devotion to the Imperial saint caused those streets to be abandoned overnight, deserted like a city abandoned because of a volcano warning, and the holy status of the harrowed streets is supposed to bar entry to all.

But the dregs of society go there. They go for shelter and to avoid the city watch, and they go there, as I understand it, in the hope of being blessed by the Saint's afterglow: to be blessed or cured or saved.

The warblind are there too, of course. It was said the Saint himself bade the broken veterans of the great war cease their mental anguish and their untameable desire for violence, a desire they had not been able to shed once they had come back from the war, and devote themselves to guarding the holloways. The warblind are the sentinels of the paths. Their gangs and tribes lurk there, and they kill or drive out any intruders. The destitute know to stay out of the way when a warblind gang comes by.

Candidates of the Maze Undue use the holloways to travel around the city unnoticed and unimpeded. It is, of course, utterly forbidden, but our entire education is about getting ourselves safely in and out of forbidden places, so it seems not only acceptable but also supremely appropriate. It is also technically hazardous, but we set our cuffs to *dead*, so our bluntness keeps everyone at bay. No one even glances at us, not even the most barbaric, augmented warblind killgang.

As a result, I sometimes find myself strolling along the holloways as if taking a sightseeing walk. I am in no hurry to leave, or hide, or flee. I look at the empty places that have not been looked at for aeons. The warblind certainly don't look at them. They see nothing but a jagged blur of a world with a target pipper painted across it, a red mist of rage and homicidal aggression that has been induced by chemicals and sustained by trauma.

Thus, dressed as the factor of an off-world buyer, I was strolling down a Hearthill holloway, heading south towards the Blackwards emporium, when I saw him.



And realised that he had seen me.

He was a beast of a man, a figure of great size. I had never seen a warrior of the legendary Adeptus Astartes, but his was the sort of stature I imagined they might possess. Tall, broad, with immense power in the frame of his shoulders and the depth of his arms.

He wore armour of plate, chainmail and leatherwork over his augmetic build. He was one of the truly old ones, one of the veteran relics that had been alive since the war. The mail and the plate segments, old and surplus scrap, had been worn down to bare metal and ceramite to remove rust, all paint and polish gone. The metal segments shone dully, like matt grey and green stones. A dust-cloak wrapped his upper body, turned around his shoulders three times, in the manner of those who dwell in the Sunderland. I had seen their likeness in ethno-history books.

From the red chevrons on his shoulder plate, I knew him to be of the Tusk Slope warblind. There was a name writ in paint along the cheek of his fighting visor, just below the glowing, buzzing slot of his optics. It read, in hobbled Enmabic, 'Deathrow'.

Under the hem of his ragged cloak, his fists were full of in-built blades. I could smell the stink of him, even at a distance, the smell of rubbish, the rotten perfume of the coarse, scavenged diet that sustained him.

He had a dog at his heels, a large, ugly cattle dog whose fight-scarred hide showed where old augmetic aggression stimulators had been excised, or torn out. The dog, eyeing me, kept a growl alive in its throat, fluttering like a panicked bird in a drum.

I stopped. I shouldn't have, of course. I should have run. I should have run, because he could clearly see me, despite my limiter cuff's setting. The killgangs never looked at the pariahs as they passed through their territories, never even glanced. I never heard of it happening before.

I should have run, because he could see me, but that very fact arrested me and made me turn to him, fascinated by his interest.

*Deathrow*. The name was notorious. One of the most brutal warblind, a killgang chief. Was this him, in person?

The cattle dog's growl rolled like a frag grenade along rockcrete. A stray wind gusted dust and clattering paper scraps across the holloway.

I took another step towards him. His shoulders rose slightly, alert.

Combat-ready, probably.

The optic trench in his visor buzzed with a greater fury, and the amber

cursor cycled from one end to the other. I could see that below the lip of his fighting visor, his mouth and chin and throat were a corded mass of scar tissue, like pipes of red liquorice bound and squeezed together.

What was I doing? I had no weapon except a slipknife in my mantle. If I could outrun the warblind, I doubted I could outrun his dog.

‘You can see me,’ I said, in street Mabiçoise.

His visor buzzed. The stink of him was awful.

‘You can see me?’ I repeated.

*Buzz.*

‘I am Beta,’ I said. I certainly don’t know why I told him *Beta*, rather than *Laurael Raeside*, the identity I was wearing.

His cattle dog answered me. For a second, its purring growl seemed to swell to make the sounds ‘death’ and ‘row’. I would swear this to be the fact of it, though I do not believe in talking dogs.

‘Deathrow,’ I echoed. The cattle dog ceased its growling, and sniffed repeatedly at a stain on the ground.

I bowed my head civilly.

‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance this day,’ I said.

I turned away and started to walk. I heard a buzz.

But death did not come at me from behind and bear me down.

# CHAPTER 7

*Laurael Raeside attends upon the Blackwards;  
a watcher at the school*

My heart rate still elevated after my encounter with the warblind creature, I left the holloway under Hearthill Rise and entered the busy streets of Ropeburn. This was an old and orderly quarter of habitation apartments rising like grey cliffs above street-level commercias and vendorsites. In some parts, sections of Queen Mab's old tram systems still operated: clanging brass cars with iron wheels and brightly painted wooden sidings rattled along the stretches of sunken track that were still viable, bearing shift-workers and market-goers, and the servants of high houses off on retail errands. At night, the cars were lit from within by gas lamps, making them little warm, gilded boxes of sanctuary, gliding and rattling through the darkening streets, but I knew they were a fading sight. Once, the trams had run as far as Feygate, and out beyond Toilgate in the south as far as the sheds, and all the way to Savant Point. The network had worn down, and only small stretches remained functional, operated by the last of the livery companies, little relics of life and motion in the city's otherwise moribund mass. I saw worn silver rails, half-buried in the street cobbles, and thus knew myself to be in a quarter where the trams still ran. I involuntarily imagined the rails to be strands of the city's nervous system, embedded in its cobbled flesh, the last responsive neural filaments in a corpse otherwise slipping away.

As the clattering trams of Ropeburn reminded me of life, so the street blocks and gibbets reminded me of death. In older times, Ropeburn's fine and broad Avenue Parnassos, lined with pollarded fepen trees and iron

benches, was the city's place of public punishment and execution. The bald stone blocks, black-iron platforms and drop-hatch stages are still there, drab with age, and the tie-beams and spars still extend above the common street like flagpoles.

The emporium of the Blackwards lay on Gelder Street, just off the avenue, the corner marked by an especially brutal-looking execution stage, all pitch-caulked timber and iron bolts. The rabble crowd had roared here once, baying for the act, drowning out the last words of dissidents and traitors alike. Drummer boys had beat a steady rhythm until the sharp, final bang, the thump of the hatch and the mutual gasp of the crowd.

The emporium had one window, lit day and night like the golden glow of a tram. Every day, the display changed, and it was said that no one ever saw employees of the emporium enter the window space to remake the window setting. It was done late at night when no one saw, some said. It was done by sorcery, claimed others. I was disinclined to heed the former, as even in a quieter street like Gelder, Queen Mab was awake day and night alike.

I imagined that for a brief moment, late each night, a drop curtain would fall across the emporium's window, and then draw again a few minutes later, to reveal a new scene, manifested by quick and ingenious stagecraft, like the living tableaux presented at the theatrical halls.

I reached the door and rang the brass bell. My cuff was set *live*. I was Laurael Raeside, a representative for off-world commercial interests.

I waited, and looked at the window display.

It was a simple show that day: a space lined with grey silk, like an undressed stage. The area behind the thick, and slightly uneven, lead glass was lit by recessed gas lamps, and a slender glowbar underlight on the inside of the sill.

The items chosen for display were two dolls. 'Mannequins' was, perhaps, a better word. They were scaled to about a quarter of human dimensions, so they might sit in the lap of an adult, like a small child. Their eyes, ingenious glass imitations, were large, and stared fixedly out of the tableau into the street. Their faces were painted white with rosy cheeks. Their mouths were wide, and slots descending from the corners of their lips showed how the wood was jointed so that a mechanism could make the mouths flap open and shut to mimic human movement. They were puppets for a voice-thrower's theatrical act. Old, I guessed, very old, and startling. They were not pretty, or even life-like, but the stare they gave seized my attention, and

the set of their mouths was neither smile nor frown, but rather grimace.

One was a boy, the other a girl. In truth, their faces seemed identical, made by the same craftsman, but one was dressed in a tiny copy of a nobleman's velvet suit, and the other in a lady's courtly gown. The gentleman doll had painted, varnished black hair; the lady had a bun made of what I was sure was genuine human hair.

They were sitting in miniature Orphaeonic Period chairs, nursery room seats, as if posing for a portrait. I could see the tiny, perfect shoes upon their feet.

The emporium door opened.

'I am Lupan,' said the shopkeeper. 'Welcome.'

'I am Laurael Raeside,' I replied, presenting my card. 'I am expected.'

'You are,' he agreed, with a very civil smile. 'Your employer's enthusiasm for collecting is well known. Blackwards is delighted to welcome one of his agents to its halls.'

'My employer,' I replied, 'is informed that Blackwards is the best emporium of its kind on this world. I have made a particular journey to visit you at his express urgings.'

We continued in this manner for some moments, returning each solicitous remark with another of the same kind, gently complimenting the reputations of my employer and the emporium alike. Custom expected as much. Lupan, dressed in a grey suit with a high white collar, spoke in faultless Low Gothic. I, as an affectation, spoke in Enmabic, though I added a slight Gudrunite accent, and made small errors of vocabulary and verb formation. My 'employer', a famous industrialist tycoon of the Scarus Sector, knew nothing about me, of course, but we had selected him for the function because of his reputation as a collector, and because his credentials were easy to falsify. Building the character of Raeside, it had occurred to me that she would attempt to speak the local dialect, to ingratiate herself. I had seen agents and factors of her kind exhibit precisely that pretension in emporia throughout the city. In preparing for the role, I also recognised that a high-scale factor would probably be older than my apparent flesh years, so I had subtly applied make-up to suggest I had benefited from expensive juvenat work, and played it as though there was a coquettish sixty- or seventy-year-old inhabiting my form.

He led me inside. He was a slight man, and prim. His mannerisms were deft and mildly fussy. Servitors, their faces porcelain, their elegant

mechanisms whirring like the actions of long-case time pieces, brought us solian tea and nafar biscuits. He talked, of everything.

The emporium was a vast warren of rooms and halls, most lined with display cases or cabinets. There was a fustian gloom. Lupan arranged hovering glow-globes to illuminate particular objects for my attention, lifting some out from under glass lids to show me. He held them in gloved hands, or laid them out on rolled-out black baize cloths.

Larger items stood on plinths, or hung from the rafters. It was like a museum of antiquities poured into a small townhouse until it was brimming.

There were dolls, books, data-slates, glasses, bottles, silverware, velocipedes, jewellery, statuary, furniture, taxidermic specimens (including a large, if threadbare, carnodon), vintage weapons, antique tech, maps, pictures, mezzopicts and simulacratints, armillary spheres and herrat-weave rugs.

We spent four hours in the place, reviewing items. I saw no other staff, or customers. Occasionally I thought I heard, as though from a distance, a snatch of children's voices, but I could not be sure. There were other noises: the sporadic chime and strike of clocks, the mutter of ancient memory systems, the tinkle of musical boxes and automatic player-claviers, the hum of antique power systems.

I made notes, on a data-slate, of items I found especially interesting, items which I believed my employer would be most taken with. I agreed to return to review them on the following day, saying I had to visit promissory brokers to arrange a money order.

'Let me show you this,' he insisted, before I left. A trio of small, beige items came out of a cabinet and were laid out on a cloth. They had been white once, but age had darkened them like bone. Their surfaces were worn, but I could still make out the trace of silver on the engine bells, and the red markings along the fuselage.

'Toys?' I said.

He nodded.

'Playthings. Models made for a child's amusement.'

'They are of weapon rockets? Missiles?'

'Rockets,' he said. 'For spaceflight. Don't look so surprised, Mamzel Raeside. The first steps from Terra were said to have been taken using chemical rockets.'

‘I am aware of history, sir, even though the detail of the oldest eras is lost in the mists. But really? Vehicles this crude?’

He smiled again.

‘I do not think they ever flew,’ he said. ‘I think these are simplified models of possible machines. A primitive idea of flight. But I show them to you because of their age. Your employer is very fond of the *oldest* things.’

‘How old?’ I asked.

‘It can only be estimated,’ he said. ‘They pre-date the ages of Strife and Technology. I think they come from the Pre-System Age, from the first millennium of the Age of Terra.’

‘What? Thirty-eight or thirty-nine thousand years ago?’

‘Perhaps. Vessels like this first took our species into the unknown,’ he said. ‘They first took us Blackwards. The family name behind this business comes from that outward urge.’

‘I think my employer will appreciate these,’ I said. ‘What price do you ask?’

‘I will write it down,’ he said.

‘And the markings on the side of the rocket ships,’ I asked. ‘The letters in red? What does C.C.C.P. mean?’

‘No one knows that,’ he said. ‘No one remembers any more.’

I returned to the Maze Undue that evening. I made my way up Highgate Hill as the last of the day’s sunlight speared across the drab black tenements and high-habs along Borodin Way and the great canyon-like gulf of Orphaeus Slope.

I saw some of the sisters out on the parapets of the Scholam Orbus’ west wall, gathering in sheets that had been hung out to dry in the north wind. In their red habits and starched white wimples, they were tiny figures upon the crumbling grey edge of the wall, but Sister Bismillah saw me, and waved.

I always liked to see her when I could, to sit with her and drink a glass of tea and talk of old times, or just to call upon her to say hello. She had all but raised me.

I went up the dank street stairs, up the side of the rock, and onto the approach, a platform of ragged flagstones that had once been part of the outer yard of the building complex. Instead of turning right into the skirts of the Maze Undue, I turned left and climbed the flight of steps up to the scholam’s west wall.

The north wind was buffeting. Ahead, like a piece of night, the Mountains stood dreaming. The air smelled of starch and clean cotton. The sisters were team-folding the linen, and stacking it in baskets to be carried below.

‘Beta,’ said Sister Bismillah. She kissed my cheeks and clutched my hand between hers.

‘Have you been out on business?’ she asked.

‘Yes, sister,’ I replied.

‘The school is teaching you well?’

‘Always.’

‘I don’t see you so much these days,’ she said.

‘I will do better. I haven’t been into the school for a long time. How are the children?’

‘All are well, as well as they are ever well. Some new poor things have come to our care.’

The white, starched wings of her wimple bent away from her face like the hooked pinions of a gull. They contrasted sharply with the darkness of her skin.

‘You have new sisters too, I see,’ I said.

Sister Bismillah turned, and acknowledged one of her sorority that I had not seen before. The sister was tall and slender, almost haughty in her athletic bearing, and her skin was pale. Her face was angular and her eyes were green. She looked dramatic in her habit and headdress, but not, I felt, quite right. She would have been more suited to courtly finery than the ascetic privations of a convent.

I was used to playing parts. I noticed when someone else seemed to be, and was getting a subtle detail wrong.

‘This is Sister Tharpe,’ said Sister Bismillah. ‘She has just come to us from the mission at Zusk.’

‘I hope you will be happy here,’ I said. ‘I was.’

‘If I can do my duty, I will be happy,’ said Sister Tharpe. It was no Zuskite accent, though a decent approximation. The flavours of her voice came from further away.

‘This is Beta,’ said Sister Bismillah. ‘As a babe, she was one of mine.’

Sister Tharpe nodded. She returned to her folding chores, but she watched me.

She was still watching me, ten minutes later, when I said goodbye to Bismillah and followed the zagging steps down into the Maze Undue.



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# CHAPTER 8

## *Which is of the Secretary*

I had returned, and washed, and was awaiting dinner, when I was informed that the Secretary wanted to see me.

We were in the refectory, all of us except Byzanti, who had not yet returned from her function that day. Corlam and Roud were playing regicide on Mentor Murlees' scuffed old board. Maphrodite, who was nimble, and quick to memorise physical actions, was helping Faria to learn the steps of a dance, a quadrille, that she would soon be obliged to perform as part of her current function. There was much laughter from the younger students watching this palaver.

Mentor Murlees came in, stood for a while to enjoy the amusement of the dancing, and then told me that the Secretary had asked for me. I went up at once. The Secretary did not debrief every day, or even every function, but some missions were considered important, and he expected a personal report.

I knocked, and he called me into his room. There was a large and welcoming fire burning in the iron grate of his fireplace, and his room was stacked, as ever, with books. They were *his* books, all notebooks, filled with his own handwriting. They were of all shapes and sizes, for I believe he acquired them from many different stationers and binders. I do not know what made him write certain things in certain formats of book; I do not know how they were differentiated, or what sort of scheme he followed. The volumes were not even labelled. I do not know how he ever found any reference he went searching for.

There were no other books in his room, no published books, or books by

other authors; no data-slates, no memory spools. His notebooks, all sizes and shapes and colours and ages, lined the shelves, the skirting boards, the library tables, the mantle, the side desk, the writing table and the plant stands. They were packed in boxes under the settle and the chaise, and stacked in teetering towers against the walls between the book cases, like the spires of a hive ravaged by clanwar.

‘Come in, Beta,’ he said, pointing me to an armchair. I had to move a pile of notebooks onto the floor to make a seat for myself. He was perched on the chaise, a stylus in his hand, and a notebook open on his lap.

He had eaten. There was a tray of dishes waiting to be taken away. He often ate early so he could press on with his work into the evening. A bottle of amasec sat on the small tray table beside him, along with a tiny porcelain thimble cup with a delicate handle. He liked a small amasec now and then. It was his only vice, I believe. He did not use any other intoxicants, not even lho-sticks, like Mam Mordaunt did. We never saw her smoke them, but we could smell them on her gown and hair.

‘How did you do today?’ he asked.

I explained it to him, and made a good account, though I left out the business with the warblind, and with Sister Bismillah, for he would have no interest in either. I talked about Blackwards, and made sure he understood that I fully appreciated the nature of the function. The Blackwards family’s age-old business in what they called collectibles had resulted in them acquiring many unusual artefacts, if only temporarily before they moved them to a buyer. The Ordos had believed for a long time that they were trafficking proscribed items. The purpose of the function was to determine if this traffic was deliberate or inadvertent, and to gauge the hazard levels of the items trafficked. I knew I would be visiting for several days as Laurael Raeside, examining their operation and stock under the pretence of assembling a portfolio for a mercurial and wealthy off-world collector.

The Secretary nodded along to my account, and took some notes. He asked a few questions, the most curious of which was, ‘Were you noticed today?’

I was puzzled. If we were detected or marked upon during a function, in any way, we were always sure to report it.

‘I was not, sir,’ I replied.

‘Not going to or coming from the function?’ he asked.

‘Not at all.’

He nodded.

‘Is there a reason you ask?’ I said.

He shook his head and cleared his throat. I heard the crackle at that moment. It was a particularly distinctive quality of his. The only one, in fact.

The Secretary was, I suppose, an unremarkable man. In his fifties, as I would guess, he was of average height and medium build, with ordinary hair, indifferent eyes, and a not-unusual face. He wore dark clothes, and his voice was plain and level. Nothing about him really stood out, apart from his inordinate collection of notebooks, of course.

And his cough.

I do not believe his cough was the consequence of any illness. It was more of a nervous affectation, or a habit. He simply cleared his throat from time to time. But when he did it, there was, behind the sound of the cough, another sound, a sound that lurked beneath like an echo or a shadow. It was a crackle. That is how I can best describe it: a crackle or prickle, like the fuzz of a vox signal, like static, like something very brittle crinkling.

It was curious. It was the first thing I ever marked about him. It would be the last, too.

The Secretary’s name was Ebon Nastrand. We only ever referred to him by his title.

He coughed again, accompanied by that crackle of vox static. It sounded as though he was trying to dislodge something gritty and fibrous from the chimney of his throat.

‘I have my reasons, Beta,’ he began. The door opened, and a young man walked in without knocking.

‘I am so sorry, Secretary,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise you had company.’

I started in genuine surprise. The young man, the intruder, was Judika Sowl.

‘Judika?’ I asked.

‘Beta.’ He smiled, but it was a nervous, awkward smile, the smile of someone caught in the middle of doing something illicit. He glanced at the Secretary, eyes hunting for a hint of what to do.

‘You came back,’ I said, marvelling. In truth, I was so taken by surprise, I didn’t really read the trace micro-expressions of awkwardness to begin with.

‘I did,’ he said, laughing a breezy laugh and lighting a smile, the smile I remembered so well.

‘No one ever comes back,’ I said. It was true. In my memory, and in the recollections of students who were seniors when I first matriculated, no student of the Maze Undue had ever returned after they had graduated.

Judika Sowl had been three years ahead of me, and had graduated and departed two winters previously. I had, I must confess, been rather captivated by him. He was immensely talented and rather beautiful. He was still tall and slender, though his loose black locks had been trimmed to a more sober, businesslike cut. He had also been kind to me, tolerating the gaucherie of what Maphrodite had named my ‘crush’. He’d never treated me like a junior, or mocked my moony fancy, which must have been very obvious.

‘Close the door there, Judika, and sit with us,’ the Secretary instructed. He turned to me.

‘It is unusual for a pupil to return,’ he admitted. ‘Judika only arrived tonight, and there hasn’t been a chance to present him to the students and welcome him home. I was going to bring him to the top room presently, but you get to preview the good news, Beta.’

My mind hovered over what circumstances might have sent him back to us. We were all destined to serve the Ordos. Had Judika been found wanting in some way? Had he been sent back to the Maze Undue for remedial training?

‘A matter has brought me back,’ Judika began. He spoke carefully, as if deciding what he was going to say as he went along.

‘Work has brought him back,’ said the Secretary. He cleared his throat. There was a crackle of static.

‘You are in service with the Ordos, though?’ I asked.

‘Of course he is,’ laughed the Secretary.

‘Is it...’ I hesitated. ‘Is it as exciting and fulfilling as we always dreamed?’

‘It is very rewarding,’ he said firmly.

‘Where are you posted?’

‘I’m not allowed to say.’

‘Do you serve a famous inquisitor?’

‘I’m not allowed to say, Beta.’

I nodded. Of course he wasn’t.

‘Are you at least allowed to tell me what rank you hold?’ I asked.

Judika glanced at the Secretary.

‘Interrogator,’ said the Secretary. ‘Judika has already risen to the rank of

interrogator. We are very proud of him. And not at all surprised.'

The Secretary looked over at Judika. The look, now I come to recollect it, was rather pointed, though I did not especially notice that at the time.

'I was just telling Beta that issues of security are arising,' he said.

'Were you?' replied Judika. He sat back on the old, cracked, red leather of the lounge, as if composing himself comfortably. He smoothed the tails of his coat over his crossed legs. 'That's probably wise.'

'She has just begun a function,' the Secretary went on, 'involving the Blackwards and their famous emporium.'

'Ah,' said Judika, as if this explained everything.

The Secretary looked back at me.

'You understood from the outset, Beta,' he said, 'that your present function was important. Some functions are practice, merely exercises to hone a student's skills.'

'This one is not,' I said.

He nodded.

'Not at all. What I omitted to tell you was that it comes with an element of danger attached.'

'Jeopardy does not concern me,' I said.

'That's good,' said the Secretary.

'But,' I added, 'it is better to know, to be prepared. Is there a reason you didn't tell me?'

'Only a concern that an awareness could betray you,' the Secretary replied. He took up his tiny thimble cup daintily and sipped from it. 'You might overcompensate, be over-wary, and thus give yourself away.'

I understood, though I was disappointed that the Secretary imagined me to be that clumsy.

'What kind of danger might the Blackwards represent?' I asked.

'None at all,' said Judika. 'The Blackwards are nothing. But if they are guilty of the crimes we suspect, then they will have contacts.'

'Beta,' said the Secretary, 'we suspect that a significant heretic society is operating in Queen Mab. It is likely they are procuring certain relics through the Blackwards, or have the Blackwards on a retainer to perform such work. It is likely they have inveigled influence at many levels of the city's social structure. And it is possible they have detected the existence of the Maze Undue.'

'Oh,' I said.

‘For the school to function, it must remain secret,’ said Judika. ‘If the Maze Undue has been detected, we must act to identify and eliminate the threat, or else pack up and move the school.’

‘To another part of the city?’ I asked, aghast.

The Secretary and Judika glanced at one another.

‘To another world,’ replied the Secretary.

‘If the Maze Undue is compromised,’ said Judika, ‘it will be necessary. The training and preparation of agents such as yourself is too valuable to the Holy Ordos to be put at risk.’

‘So what must happen?’ I asked.

‘We will carry on for now,’ said the Secretary. ‘Judika has been sent by the Ordos, may the Throne bless him, to review the situation. He will watch over us, and assess if we are at risk.’

‘With luck, I might be able to smoke out and sanction this menace,’ said Judika.

‘Judika will be our guardian angel for a while,’ said the Secretary. He cleared his throat. Static prickled.

‘So, tomorrow?’ I asked.

‘Go back,’ said the Secretary. ‘Continue with your function. All functions must continue for now. You are not the only pupil engaged in something that is more than an exercise.’

‘In the evening, when you return,’ said Judika, ‘perhaps you could brief me and the Secretary personally? We’ll do that daily, just for now. Ebon will be waiting for you.’

‘Of course,’ I said. I was slightly dumbfounded, because he had just referred to the Secretary by his name, his forename no less, as if they were old friends or equals.

‘Well, you need a good night’s rest,’ said the Secretary. ‘Is there anything else you want to ask us before you go to dinner and then retire?’

‘Yes, Secretary,’ I said. ‘Is it the Cognitae?’

# CHAPTER 9

## *Of apprehension*

They both stared at me.

‘You said a word then,’ began the Secretary. ‘Beta, what was it, the word you used?’

‘The word was *Cognitae*, sir,’ I replied.

‘And why... why would you use that word, Beta?’ he asked.

‘It is a deduction, sir,’ I said plainly. ‘A heretic society, one of influence and power. This is what I understand the *Cognitae* to be. So I asked the question.’

‘When did you ever hear such a word?’ asked Judika stiffly.

‘Last year,’ I replied. I didn’t much like his tone. It seemed as though he was preparing to scold me. The Secretary could scold me. Any of the mentors could, except perhaps Murlees, who frankly did not have it in him to be harsh. But Judika Sowl could not. Not even if he were a high and mighty interrogator these days.

I looked at the Secretary.

‘When the man broke in last year, and attacked Mentor Saur. He said the word before he died. Mentor Saur told me it was the name of a damnable and black society. I told all this to Mam Mordaunt.’

‘She did,’ the Secretary told Judika, ‘she did indeed. It was an unpleasant incident, which we had hoped would be isolated.’

He looked back at me. He cleared his throat, but still the static would not clear away.

‘Beta,’ he said carefully, ‘I do not believe that either Thaddeus or Mam Mordaunt told you very much about the *Cognitae* at all. Yet you presume—’



‘It was a deduction, sir,’ I said. ‘I simply made a deduction, and connected the few facts I knew. Was it wrong of me to speculate? Was it wrong of me to ask?’

‘Not at all,’ said the Secretary. ‘I think it’s very fine that you did. It proves that you are among our very best, and that your temper is of the finest quality.’

I saw that Judika was watching me very carefully. I don’t think he liked hearing me complimented in this way. I had once found those eyes so very appealing, but now they seemed dark and hard, like the copper coins they place on the eyes of the dead down at the Feygate Charnel.

‘Do not mention the word, or the idea, to anyone,’ the Secretary told me. ‘I will prepare some notes for you, personally, that we can review tomorrow. A few pointers.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said.

‘You know that the Cognitae impersonate, don’t you?’ asked Judika.

‘Yes.’

‘They act to effect infiltration, and they are trained in methods very similar to the ones we hone here at the Maze Undue.’

‘That is how it seems to me,’ I agreed, ‘and they impersonate even servants of the Holy Ordos.’

‘They do,’ replied Judika. ‘So be on your guard. If anyone confronts you, and shows you a rosette to prove his or her authority, do not believe it.’

‘I will not,’ I assured him.

‘What should I do instead?’ I asked the Secretary as an afterthought.

The Secretary hesitated, so Judika answered me instead.

‘Kill them,’ he said.

I had little appetite for the evening meal. I picked at it. No one seemed to notice, because the Secretary came in, and brought Judika to show to everyone. Faria, Corlam, Byzanti (who had, by that time, returned for the day) and Maphrodite had all known him in the old days, and they leapt up to greet him, and quizzed him incessantly. He laughed, and answered their prattle evasively.

Through it all, he kept looking past them at me. His eyes were still hard, like the coins of the dead.

I went off to my room to sleep. From the refectory, I heard laughter and voices, and later, a viol and tambor.

Later still, the Maze Undue was silent.

I woke, in the pitch darkness of night's deepest part. The house had gone to sleep, and the lights had been put out. I had fallen asleep in my cot, over the book I had been reading, and my lamp had burned out. I had been dreaming. In the dream, I had seen endless dusty shelves lined with bric-a-brac, a piece of dream that I presumed had been inspired by my visit to the Blackwards emporium. I fancy that, at some point, the dolls from the shop window turned up too, and spoke to me, or rather made silent clacks of their wooden mouth-mechanisms. I felt eyes watching me as well, throughout the dream. I did not see the face the eyes belonged to, but they seemed as hard as copper coins, so I presumed they belonged to Judika Sowl.

I should say, for the record, that I set no store by the content of dreams. I have yet to be convinced by the work of dreamreaders and oneirocriticks, and have little belief in the prophetic nature of dreams, even though the Good and the Great of Mankind's Imperium have often been led by clear and precise dream visions down through history.

Dreams haven't, in my experience, had any authentic currency, and I mistrust those who fancy otherwise. Dreams are too ephemeral, too flimsy. They are simply the events of the day, disjointed and lent odd emphasis by our resting minds, and then swirled about like leaf-litter in an autumn breeze so that they seem to possess a life of their own, and seem to shuffle into some cryptic meaning.

Dreams are simply our minds resting, and saving to memory recent happenings and sights. They are like a system reset, I think, for the human mind. They have no purpose, and carry no weight.

Nevertheless, they can be unsettling.

I awoke in the dark, and felt, with a false certainty that dreaming can reinforce, that the eyes were still upon me.

It was the most curious feeling. I lay still for a moment, imagining it to be my dream lingering. I felt that it would shortly dispel, as all dreams do.

But it did not. I felt that I was not alone, or rather that there was, in the Maze Undue, some intrusive presence, a force, some malign entity that had got in while we slumbered and was spying on us all.

I got out of bed and pulled on some clothes, the nearest that were to hand in the darkness. It was cold, distinctly cold. Given the high position of the Maze Undue, it was often cold during the night, when the winds off the Mountains assailed Highgate Hill, but this cold was peculiar.

I struck a match, not to ignite my lamp and gain light, but to hold up a flame. It flickered and bent.

It was as I thought. The Maze Undue was old, and it had significant character and idiosyncrasies. Live in a place like this long enough, and you come to know them. I knew that in my room, a flame would only stir in a breeze if the breeze was coming up along the hall from the west end of the landing, and that the only way a breeze like that could occur was if the lower stair door had been left open.

I shook out the match. I pulled on my boots and stepped out into the hallway, pulling the door of my room closed behind me.

It was dark, but my eyes adjusted. Some little starlight was seeping in through the skylights and smudged window panes, and certain shapes had a silver outline. The rest was blue-black darkness. I could plainly feel the breeze now, gentle but distinct.

I was sure that no one had intruded. Someone had merely left a door unlatched down below. The Maze Undue was soundly guarded by wards and charms, by sensors, by motion detectors and by tripwires, especially in the ragged hem of the skirts. It was not a place that someone could simply break into undetected.

Except the man in the drill, the ruthless Cognitae agent, he had broken in.

I steadied myself. The key word was *undetected*. If someone had broken in, the alarms would have been tripped. The Cognitae assassin had broken in, but Mentor Saur had discovered him before he could penetrate beyond the drill.

I reached the stairs. Looking down over the banister rail into the deep, tight, long drop of the wooden staircase, I could see very little. I had expected to see a pale cast of light coming in through the open door below. There was no light. I felt the breeze again, against my cheek.

I crept down, all six flights, to the lower stair door. I made no sound. I knew which of the old, worn steps to avoid because they groaned or complained under a weight, and I knew exactly where to place my feet on others, so as to prevent them from creaking.

I reached the lower stair door. There was no cast of light at the foot of the stairs because the door was not open, not even ajar. It was shut, and bolted from my side, the inside. There was no breeze. Not even the slightest cold gust slid like a knife around the edges of the door.

I started back up the stairs again. I confess that I was experiencing a little

anxiety. My solid, rational explanation had been disproved.

I went back up the stairs. Halfway up the six flights, I misstepped and made a stair creak. I froze. I waited. Nothing moved. Nothing else made a sound. I breathed out, and mentally scolded myself. Anxiety had made me careless, and had forced an error out of me. Anxiety engendered haste, Mentor Saur always taught us, and haste breeds carelessness. Carelessness is your enemy. Carelessness is not big or strong, nor even menacing, but he is an enemy that will kill you quick enough. Knowledge, for the other part, is an ally. Use Knowledge, and he will guard and repay you. Do not allow Carelessness to make you turn your back on Knowledge, not even for a instant.

I knew the house. I knew the Maze Undue in intimate detail, and that was my ally, my Knowledge. But here was treacherous Carelessness forcing me to ignore that Know-ledge and step upon a wooden stair that would betray me.

I reprimanded myself, and resumed my ascent with greater confidence and determination.

Back on the landing where I had begun my descent, on my own hallway, I stood for a moment. I felt the breeze again, quite distinctly. It could not be coming from below, that I had established.

There was only one other possibility. It was coming from above.

Now, above my hall the staircase leads onto landings and ladders, and a cluster of disused attics. We didn't go up there, because the floors were rotten and unsafe, and so I had not considered it. But if an attic window had swung open, or a section of old slate work fallen away, that would explain the breeze.

I went up. The stairs took me to the next landing. Then a ladder gave me access to the roof-hole, and I pulled myself up into the attics. It was dusty, fearsomely dusty: as dusty, I fancied, as the legendary City of Dust, said to lie out in the Sunderland. I wanted to cough, but I kept the dry tickle under control.

The attics were spaces of beams and rafters, of platforms and planked shelves, of stone walls with old windows, which had been internal for centuries after some conversion or extension, but which served now as doors into other compartments. The ceilings were low in some places, and towering in others, slopes of tiled skin and wooden rib. Cobwebs drifted like smoke.

We had come up as children, when the attics were a place of escape and recreation. The ceiling of the fourth hall had fallen in after heavy rains, and after that we were forbidden to go up. I remembered it, though, every turn and nook. I saw places where we had scratched our names on beams or slates or brick. Many names. The names of pupils who had been forgotten long before I ever came into the Maze Undue. Here, still, was a doll, a little pale thing with a china face, that some pupil had set upon a cross-tie years ago and had never come back for. We had found it during our explorations, thick with dust, but had not dared to touch or move it. It belonged here. As I saw it that night, with more adult eyes, I felt it had not been so much set down and forgotten, as deliberately placed, as if this cross-tie was its new station in life, a seat from which it should watch and guard.

In another place, I found a small glass beaker that we had left there eight or nine years before. We had gone hunting spiders, and the beaker was to cup over them. But we had found none, though the roofspace was thick with cobwebs. The beaker had been put down and never collected.

A breath of wind stirred through the attics. I moved ahead, and found that an old, boarded partition had been removed, a partition that stoppered one of the places where the Scholam Orbus and the Maze Undue wound into one another. Was it the work of children, coming up through the orphanage, taking down boards to explore? We had done just that, when we had been the children of the orphanage.

I half-expected to hear the laughter of a child, distant and stifled, tinkling back through the attic gloom from its hiding place. From the past.

And I did.

Writing the words here, just recalling it, I still feel the sharp, quick temperature drop of fear. It was not the most frightening thing that had ever happened to me, but it was close; it would make a shortlist of the most frightening. The nature of it, in particular, the unexceptional fact of it, made it worse. An everyday sound, rendered uncanny by the situation, and delivered on cue.

I told myself it was simply my fancy. I reassured myself that it was self-suggestion. I had been thinking of it, and my imagination had supplied the rest.

Then I laughed out loud, realising that an instant of fear had deprived me of my sensible faculties. I had barely considered the simplest and most logical explanation: it *was* children. It was children from next door,

sneaking in and exploring after dark.

I clambered over a low beam, dislodging decades of dust like talcum powder, and entered the next part of the roofspace world, homing in, as I thought, on the laughter I had heard.

But through the space, across the next boarded floor of the attic, no dust was disturbed. I was lithe enough, and I had not been able to move without swirling the stuff around. If children were here, even small children, there would be footprints on the boards.

Then, just ahead through the beams and cross-ties, I glimpsed something move. Something white... *spectral*, as it seemed to me.

I moved forwards. It did not hear me at first. Then it turned, and found me facing it.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked Sister Tharpe. ‘And how have you left no footprints in the dust?’

# CHAPTER 10

*Which concerns a desperate struggle*

Sister Tharpe stared at me, her green eyes like the active lights of a weapon visor.

‘I did not hear you,’ she said. Surprise had taken even more of the fake Zuskite accent out of her voice.

‘You were not supposed to,’ I replied.

She composed herself. She was in her sorority’s robes, and her starched headdress had caught the starlight, making the whiteness I had glimpsed.

‘Beta, isn’t it?’ she asked.

She knew full well. Even in the low light, I could read her face: surprise, the awkwardness of being caught, and by me especially. She was trying to hide all of that, of course.

‘Sister Tharpe,’ I said firmly. ‘What are you doing here?’

She shrugged.

‘I confess, I could not sleep,’ she said. ‘I am new here, new to the scholam. I could not settle, even when all the children were soundly off. I thought I would look around, explore. I thought the activity might calm me and, may the Emperor protect, tire me enough for slumber.’

‘You are not in the scholam,’ I said. ‘You are in the Maze Undue.’

‘Am I?’ she said. ‘I had no notion.’

A lie. Easy to spot, from tone alone.

‘You must have known,’ I said. ‘You took away boards and came through a wall space that had been shut up.’

‘I didn’t realise, Beta,’ she said.

She used my name. An interesting ploy, meant to diffuse the tension. I

wasn't having it. I was fairly sure I knew what she was, and I was fast regretting not arming myself before leaving my room. I remembered Judika's surprising words. But how does one arm oneself to kill a nun?

Not that she was. This Tharpe was no sister of the orphanage, though she had shown sense in keeping her robes on when she went spying so she could claim to have taken a wrong turn on her midnight walk if caught.

'Who are you?' I asked.

'Bismillah told you,' she replied.

'Sister Bismillah doesn't know you either,' I replied. 'How have you not disturbed the dust?'

She glanced down, and saw that I had noticed the unnatural manner of her passage. She looked at me squarely.

'Let me pass,' she said. 'Let me go back to the orphanage. This is a mistake. Let me pass, and I won't have—'

She stopped.

'You won't have to do what?' I asked. 'Hurt me?'

'I don't want to hurt you,' she said. She sounded as if she was telling the truth, but all good lies sound that way, don't they?

'I can assure you,' I replied, 'you won't hurt me.'

She came at me. I was ready for it. I had already guessed how she would attack. I had guessed it from the undisturbed dust, and so I knew not to be looking for a tension in the muscles, and knew not to be waiting for a sudden flex and leap.

She flew at me. I mean this literally. She was a telekine, and the force of her mind propelled her at me as though she had been fired from a circus cannon.

But I was ready. I dropped to my right, leading with my shoulder, snapping at the knees, just as Mentor Saur had taught us in evasion class. She went over me, and I rolled under her, coming up with my hand on my cuff.

She landed on a crossbeam. She was poised, knees bent, her arms wide, the tails of her robes trailing. She looked like a great white-crested owl perched upon a branch. She turned, springing down. Dust kicked up around her feet as she landed. Her mind was no longer lifting her. It was reaching for me. I felt it close around me, like the coils of a constricting snake, pinning me, pinning my arms, imprisoning me.

I turned my cuff to *dead*.

The null of the pariah broke her grip and cancelled her outreaching mind.



She cried out, in shock and distress, to find her extension gone. The telekine, so used to the freedom of mental agility, always feels especially deprived by the unlimited blank.

She stumbled, the heel of her palm pressed against her forehead in pain. She cursed, in a language I didn't know. She lunged.

I read the placement of her feet, the angle of her bodyline. I made a passing block, as Mentor Saur had taught me.

I was utterly unprepared for her strength. Even the impact of deflection threw me sideways. I hit a cross-tie with my shoulder, bounced off, and gasped in pain. The impact rattled dust and cobwebs out of the rafters and the blackness of the roofspace, swirling it around us like flour from a sifter.

Now a kick came. It was impeded slightly by the skirts of the sorority robes she was wearing. I ducked under the cross-tie I had struck, putting it between us, and her kick splintered the old wood, shaking out more dust like powder snow upon us.

I backed away. She swung under the tie, and threw a chop with one hand, followed by a jab with the other. I blocked the first with a forearm, and twisted my body to let the second pass my ribs. Just blocking hurt: the slap bruised my bones. The old boards under us were shivering and quaking.

She kicked in again, a spin kick. I leapt out of its path, then caught her ankle and wrenched it, hoping to flip her off balance and onto her face.

But her balance was superb. She adjusted, on one leg, and turned the sweeping kick into a heel punch. Her foot, trapped between my hands, pistoned into my chest.

I fell backwards and my shoulder blades crashed into another cross-tie, bringing down a further deluge of dust. Winded and slightly stunned, I could not recover, but fell backwards under the tie, rolling and coughing.

She came under the tie, and reached for me. I realised that her level of training was superb. Even deprived of her telekine talents, she would take me down very easily. It was not a level of skill that had been honed in a ring by a mentor, day after day. It was a level of skill finessed through practical application. She had fought before. Many times. She had killed this way.

But she had not killed me. She was reaching out for me. She wanted me subdued. Why the restraint?

I didn't care, in fairness. All I recognised was that her restraint was a weakness I could exploit. As she reached for me, I grabbed her hand and pulled her hard, so that her head and shoulder collided with an upright

beam. This impact brought actual slates down out of the roof. They shattered on the boards beside her.

I was still prone. I hooked out my left leg, and swept her feet away before she could recover.

She landed hard, with a crash that shivered the whole section of the attic, filling the close air with more dust. I rolled aside to regain my feet, but by then I had entirely forgotten where in the roofspace I was.

The flooring ended and there was a drop of about two metres into a deeper space. I went over it and landed badly, injuring, in particular, my right elbow and wrist. My impact was the loudest yet. Several old wooden crates fell over, and my left heel cracked through the floor boarding, punching a hole in the plaster ceiling beneath. Light filtered up through this hole.

She leapt down beside me, and made to grab me again. I evaded, executed a half-turn, and blocked her next two blows, though my right arm hurt in the accomplishment of this.

In retaliation, I drove in a jab that actually struck home. She reeled slightly, and I moved in again, throwing a longer, extended jab.

I knew she would see it coming, and slide out of its line. In fact, I was counting on her doing so.

Because I was standing on the hem of her robes.

She tried to dodge, found herself pinned and tightly constrained by her habit, and her balance went. My blow hit, with little effect, but she was already wrong-footed and falling. She had been brought down by the sorority robes that, though she wore them convincingly, she was not at all used to.

She hit the floor heavily, and the floor gave way.

A section of the rotting attic boards, and the joists beneath them, unable to withstand further punishment, collapsed under her in a detonation of dust and splinters, and the most considerable uproar of snapping wood. She, and the whole portion of the ailing floor, dropped away into the corridor below with an almighty crash.

The damage to the ancient and decrepit house, once begun, could not be easily limited. What weakened flooring remained let out a warning groan, then proceeded to give under me too. Unable to grab anything, I dropped with it, feet first. It was a long drop, nevertheless, and the landing spilled me over. Pieces of roof and slate, and board and fibre continued to rain down on me.

I was dazed for a moment. The impact of the landing had shaken me. A piece of falling tile had struck me on the head, and made my vision and senses swim. I was choking on the dust.

We had come down into the upper hallway called the Top Walk. It was wood panelled, and lit at intervals with wall-mounted gas lamps. Though illuminated, this space seemed more impenetrable to human vision than the darkness of the attics above. Centuries of dust clogged the air like the autumn fogs that come up onto the marshlands south of Toilgate, curdled and yellow. The lamps made visibility worse, rendering the air as bright smoke. It was harder to see anything here than it had been upstairs in the dark. All I could make out were piles of plaster chunks, broken boards and cracked tiles that had been deposited on the hallway carpet.

I looked around, found a wall, leaned against it, and coughed some more. I could hear a bell ringing. The commotion had finally caused the Maze Undue's night alarm to be rung. Were those footsteps racing up the wooden stairs below, or was it just the blood pounding in my ears?

My right arm throbbed with pain at the wrist and elbow, my left knee too, and I was sure that the tile had left a gash on my scalp, because that was the most painful thing of all.

I searched for her in the swirl. The yellow dust seemed sulphurous and toxic. I wondered what ancient residues of glue and animal hair and plaster had aerosolised because of the collapse. What foul old particles were we breathing in?

I took up a shard of tile, perhaps even the very one that had stung my head, and clutched it as a makeshift weapon, like the scrapers used on hides by primitive humans.

Where was she? A figure darted through the glowing dust ahead of me. She was trying to flee.

I followed. She had found the door at the end of the hall, slamming it open, letting in a welcome draught of cold air that blew back and thinned the noxious dust. I was still coughing.

I heard a shout, and saw Judika running up behind me. His face was grim. He was carrying a fine autopistol, and was busily loading it for use. It was a Hecuter 116. I knew this from the pattern books Mentor Saur forced us to study. I knew that it carried a clip of forty solid rounds, that it was accurate to almost half a kilometre, that the small, dense rounds could penetrate most surfaces, including standard body armours. The weapon had a bluey metal

sheen and a black and white bone grip. That meant it was a custom-finished piece, a vanity gun, not bought from an armourer's standard stock.

A vanity piece. Was this Judika nowadays? A high-and-mighty interrogator with a custom gun, and airs and graces too, no doubt?

'Intruder,' I snapped, spitting to clear my throat.

'We are aware,' he replied. 'Which way?'

I pointed.

'Stay back,' he said. 'And turn on your cuff.'

'What?' I exclaimed. 'She's a telekine. A vicious one.'

'Turn on your cuff!' he insisted. 'Beta, it's not my order! It's the Secretary's. If we don't blunt her, we can track her mind.'

Could we, indeed? I knew of no one in the Maze Undue who had such psychic gifts. But then we knew nothing about the faculties of the Secretary or the other mentors. We had never seen them tested by such an invasion.

I set my cuff to *live*.

Judika led the way down the hall, the pistol raised. He looked like he knew what to do with it, but then Saur had trained him too.

The air was filmed with dust, but visibility was better. We spotted her, dashing into the opening of a small, narrow staircase that led back up into the attics. Perhaps she intended to double back through the rambling dimensions of the roof.

Judika rushed up after her. I was close behind, close enough to see him come up over the lip of the attic floor and take aim. The gunfire was deafening in the closed space. Flames barked from the snout of the gun. The shots ripped into cross-ties, shattered wooden crates and the dry and empty bottles inside, and punched out some of the tiles. Each impact was an explosion of dust and splinters.

Sister Tharpe had taken cover. We saw her dart, low, from behind a stack of packing crates towards the more significant shield of a brick chimney breast. Judika fired again, stitching three shots across the chimney that painted the air red with brick dust.

He paused, edged around, and fired a third burst. This time he hit something more significant. Something flopped onto the blackened boards. I thought at first he had killed her, but it was simply her starched white headdress, mangled and dirty.

I felt a sudden, wallowing ebb of telekinesis. Judika was about to resume firing.

‘Wait!’ I cried.

He did not. He blasted again, a stream of shots.

Sister Tharpe had emerged from behind the chimney stack, striding out to meet the bullets.

She was smiling.

Her headdress was already missing. As she appeared, she stepped out of her sorority robes too, all badged with soot and dust, and freed herself of them. It was a curiously sexual manoeuvre, letting her garments fall away behind her. She was like a courtesan in the comfort of her boudoir, advancing lasciviously upon her client.

Unburdened by the bulky robes, she was even taller and more slender than I had imagined. She was dressed in a tight bodyglove of brown leather. Her hair, black as Old Night, had been bound up in a tight chignon in order that it might fit underneath the headdress.

She met the bullets. A sharp, fluid gesture of her right hand, as one would make to brush aside a persistent horsefly, made them all turn aside at right angles and rip into the underside slope of the roof, shattering the slates.

Judika snarled and fired again.

She cried out in reply, a growl of defiance, and raised both hands, stopping the next six rounds with an invisible wall that squashed them flat and sent them scattering like coins onto the floorboards.

‘Desist,’ she said.

She made a clutching gesture with her right hand, then jerked it aside. The gun ripped free of Judika’s grip and flew across the attic. He threw himself at her, but she crossed her arms in front of her body, her fingertips aiming at the floor, and Judika left the ground.

She drove him up into the roof, cracking a rafter and smashing roof tiles so they rained down everywhere. Then she threw him aside. Judika slammed into a cross-tie and tumbled onto the floor.

I knew he would not be getting back up for some time. Part of me sincerely hoped that he was not badly hurt. The integrity of the Maze Undue, and the personal welfare of a boy whom I had been smitten with for a long time was at stake. In that regard, I was vengeful and unrestrained.

But part of me thought he deserved the bumps and rough handling because of his foolishness. We were blanks, and we go against a telekine limited? What had the Secretary been thinking? What was Judika Sowl thinking? Why were we ignoring our key strength and our basic training?

I had reached the pistol, where it had fallen. I would take it up, disarm my cuff, and force her to surrender or forfeit her life.

I reached for the gun, but my grab was arrested. An object suddenly pinned the cuff of my tunic to the floorboards. It was a long, silver pin, driven in like a railway spike by invisible hands. I was trapped, unable to pull my sleeve free. The gun, tantalisingly out of reach, rose up, and flew away to the very far end of the long attic.

The silver pin dug itself out, and raced off into the air like a guided missile. My hand freed, I rolled and turned.

Sister Tharpe walked towards me, the silver pin orbiting her like a pet bird. A second silver pin, twin of the first, drew itself out of the tight bun of her black hair, and began to rotate around her in an opposite orbit. Every time they passed close to me, I heard them hum.

‘Beta,’ she said. ‘This was not supposed to occur. An unfortunate turn of events. I am leaving now. Do not attempt to obstruct me.’

+She will not have to.+

The psionic pronouncement made me wince. Mind-voices are often ghastly contortions of their owner’s flesh voice.

This was scarcely human.

I saw sudden and considerable alarm cross Sister Tharpe’s face.

Something came up into the attic to join us. I did not know where it came from, apart from ‘out of someone’s mind’, though in fact the thought ‘out of the daemonic maelstrom’ also occurred to me.

It was a thought-form. I saw it as a blur, a blur of reddish light, like a piece of a swollen, bloody sunset fashioned into a vaguely human shape and then allowed to walk free. It oozed up into the cold darkness of the attic and faced Sister Tharpe.

It sizzled. It crackled and seethed, as though it was made from a swarm of angry neon insects, or as though it was a scorching, radioactive thing that was cooking the very air.

Then the true battle began.

# CHAPTER 11

*In which an unimaginably terrible thing occurs*

The thought-form, a thing of malice, advanced through the cold gloom of the attic towards Sister Tharpe. It was like a dull, dying sun that had risen alone in a dark sky.

Everything began to shake. The attic was shaking. The upper floors of the Maze Undue were shaking. Dust was swirling. Pegs were rattling loose. Tiles were dropping out of the roof and smashing on the shivering floorboards. Everywhere there was a cracking and groaning and screeching of wood.

The fierce, bloodshot light kept moving, steadfast. I shrank back from it. The light was burning hot, but the attic was brutally cold. A winter wind was suddenly invading through every crack and slot.

I heard the thought-form speak to her again, its mind-voice jarring my unprotected brain.

+What are you? What has sent you?+

Sister Tharpe recoiled from it. Her face could not hide her consternation. She twisted her hands and the silver kine blades whipped at the red shadow, but they could do no damage.

+Patience. Patience. Patience.+

The nonvocal words etched into our thoughts like acid. I stumbled back, and tried to find Judika, but I could not take my eyes off the daemonic light.

+He should not have sent you to us. He is a fool, and he will grieve over his error. Tell him, tell him Grael Magent found his spy and ended her.+

The bloodshot light struck.

The force of its telekinetic fury burst the ancient house's ailing roof,

flinging slates into the air from the initial point of impact, and then ripping along the ridge line, peeling the entire roof back from the rafters. This rippling, travelling force threw thousands of loose tiles into the night wind like dry leaves. The attic section we occupied was suddenly opened to the air, and shredded sheets of tiles were blowing off into the sky like sloughed snakeskin. The rafters themselves, along with the ridge beam, the purlins and the trusses, splintered and cracked, or burned away like fishbones in a fire.

As the section of roof tore away, I was fully exposed to the fierce, cold wind that had been trying to get in since the thought-form appeared. I realised quite how precariously high up the top of the Maze Undue was, perched on the seat of Highgate Hill overlooking the twinkling lights of the city. We were at the summit of the sky, with faraway stars below us.

With the wind came rain, torrential rain, which I had not been aware was falling. The driving rain drenched us in the open attic, wetting down the dust. A terrible storm had, that night, dropped across the city of Queen Mab, blotting out the stars and sending down a deluge, but the battle inside the Maze Undue had quite distracted us from the elemental changes without.

I wondered then, as I wonder now, if the thought-form hadn't brought the storm with it.

I clung to a broken spar of side post and hoped the wind would not pluck me out of the attic and cast me away over the city like a piece of slate. The rain was in my face, and the wind was pulling my hair. I screamed Judika's name. I screamed out Sister Tharpe's name too.

She fled back along the attic, dodging between beams and under rafters as they were wrenched away. The pitched roof drew aside, like a blanket or ground sheet lifted up and shaken so as to find a mouse beneath it. The further she ran, the further the roof peeled back to expose her, denying her even the slightest refuge or shelter. Purlins and beams that had been in place for many centuries tumbled away into the sky like matchsticks.

She was brave. In the face of the bloodshot thought-form thing, she was very brave indeed. The possibilities of flight exhausted, she turned to meet her nemesis. She deployed her formidable telekinetics against it. The concussion of their minds knocked me down and clouted my ears. Several old chimney stacks and part of an outside wall perished, dumping tonnes of friable stone and brick down through the Maze Undue, through lower roofs, through corridors and rooms.



Something grabbed me. I looked around, prepared to fight almost anything off, but saw Mentor Saur. He had a gun in one hand, a large laspistol, and his other hand had clamped me by the arm. He had a look on his face that one might expect to see worn at a funeral or a deathbed vigil.

‘Get below!’ he yelled at me over the wind and rain and the sounds of the building’s fabric shredding.

‘Something must be done, mentor!’ I cried.

‘It *is* being done,’ he yelled back, shoving me towards the attic steps. ‘*Hajara!*’

For all I would obey him, obey his words and his urgings, I balked and looked back in surprise.

‘*Hajara!*’ he repeated.

A code word, one of the school’s simple, key commands.

‘Surely, even for this—’ I started to say.

‘Not for this, for *them*,’ he said.

Mentor Saur shook me and turned me to look at the sky. Lights were approaching out of the storm. They looked like blue-white stars, rolling down the slope of the sky towards us, but I realised they were the powerful sweep lights of flying machines. Black shapes, like carrion birds, were wheeling through the rain towards the high house. I could already hear the coarse song of their lifter engines.

‘A raid?’ I asked. ‘That woman was just the scout? Who are our enemies that we—’

‘Go, you little idiot!’ Saur bellowed at me. ‘*Hajara!*’

I ran down the steps, down the old wooden stairs, into the trembling house. Wind and rain followed me. The wind was slamming at every shutter and window, and the Maze Undue was shaking from the tumult of the conflict underway above. I was shaking. If the Maze Undue had not been in violent tremor, I would nevertheless have been unable to hold my hands steady.

I had forgotten my hurts and pains, my minor injuries. All was eclipsed by the shock of the terrible thing that was happening to us, to the school, to our home.

*Hajara*. An antique word saved from the old desert languages of Terra. Dissolution. Flight. Dispersal. The scattering of a community. We had been trained in the understanding that if the order were ever given, we would know precisely what to do without any further instruction, and never question the command.

We had been raised in the expectation that it would never have to be given.

I ran down, down towards my room, and took from the hook on the back of the door a leather satchel that hung there, a bag pre-packed with essentials, and always ready. There was no time to look around or say goodbye, no time to even consider taking other possessions.

I emerged from my room, and met Faria coming from hers. She had her own satchel. She was clenching her jaw to fight back the tears in her eyes. She looked at me. We embraced quickly, then she turned and started to run without looking back.

I moved my own way. I had decided to descend and take the west door out through the skirts into Highgate. I passed two of the youngest children on the stairs. They were so intent on flight they did not even once look at me.

From above came more crashes and loud noises. Outside, the roar of the flying machines closing in exceeded the raging gale. Sweep lights flashed along the landing, peering in through old windows with blinding beams. I ran the length of the landing anyway, daring the lights to find me.

One of the landing's five large windows exploded in at me. Pieces of glass flew, pieces of frame. I jumped back and shielded my face. Something had struck the window outside and smashed it in out of its old frame.

I looked out, into the wind, into the rain.

Directly below me, Sister Tharpe clung to the fractured sill. Some force I could barely imagine had thrown her off the rooftop, but she had struck the side of the building on the way down, and arrested her plunge. I saw how she had done it. Her right hand was clamped around one of her silver pins, which was stabbed into the wooden sill like a climbing spike.

She was cut and bleeding. Her hair was plastered to her face by the rain, and by blood. Her clothing was torn. She clung on by her hands and, perhaps, by the force of her mind, but her feet were swinging above a sheer drop of ten storeys down into the lower, jumbled skirts of the school building. The rain-flecked night yawned below her, and fragments of debris, glass and wood, from the window she had destroyed, tumbled away past her into the abyss.

She looked up at me. Her eyes were green. She was not afraid, but she was certain of her own predicament.

'Why?' I asked. 'Why have you done this to us? Are you so avowedly our foes?'

'Help me,' she gasped.

‘Help you? You have destroyed everything!’ I cried. My anger for her was all-consuming.

‘It had to be destroyed,’ she struggled. ‘You have no idea. It had to be destroyed.’

Her hands were slipping on the broken, wet wood and the silver pin, which was slightly bent. She was weak and hurt, and the strain was overwhelming. I felt her mind pulling at me, trying to find purchase, trying to take hold of my hands and forearms.

I took hold of my cuff and switched it *dead*.

A flicker of surprise crossed her face. Her grip was gone. All the force of her mind was sapped, and only her fingertips arrested her descent.

It was not enough.

She fell away, backwards, into the blackness and the rain, her arms and legs flailing.

The drop was very far. I did not see her land, nor did I want to.

# CHAPTER 12

## *Undue undone*

I took the silver pin out of the wood. It was a serviceable weapon where no others were available. I descended into the skirts of the Maze Undue, throwing myself down one dark staircase after another. Through open doors, I saw furniture knocked over and possessions left behind by other members of the school on their evacuation.

The engines of the circling flying machines made the loudest sounds of all. Sweep lights stabbed in at windows as they passed. I was certain that these were gunship fliers, military craft hired or stolen for the purpose. There was such single-minded malevolence behind this attack. Would the gunships shortly commence firing on the school? Would they demolish the place, stone by stone, with their radial guns and cannon batteries?

I heard other sounds. The battering and stoving in of doors, the kicking of shutters. Men – the agents of our faceless enemy – were storming the school. Perhaps this was to my advantage, I thought. The gunships would not risk firing on a structure occupied by its allies. Men I could deal with. Gunships I could not.

I thought of the woman I had killed, or at least consigned to a certain death. It gave me pause, but I did not feel sick over it. They had made themselves our enemies, and they had revealed their animus. War had been declared, and we were just defending ourselves, in the name of the Emperor who is our guide and master.

In the name of the Holy Inquisition, we had unimpeachable justification for our actions. What justification did these heretics have for theirs?

I swung my satchel over my shoulder, and made for the west door. Roud

appeared, out of nowhere. He had his satchel, and also a gun, which he had procured from I don't know where. Young, frightened, he aimed it at me until he saw who I was.

'*Hajara*,' he said.

'I know,' I said.

'They are devils,' he said, 'and they are everywhere.'

'Just get out,' I told him. 'You don't need the gun. Just get out. Go to ground.'

Roud was gangly, in the midst of a major growth spurt, and his skin was poor. He looked like a youth waving a toy gun, except the gun was real.

A door behind him was flung open. It was all but taken off its hinges by the manual ram tool that had splintered the lock. Two men came in, one of them casting aside the hefty ram bar. They were dressed in dark clothes, and were wet with rain. They had dark glasses with small round lenses, and ballistic jack shirts.

'Lie down on the floor!' one shouted.

Roud shot him.

Roud was a good shot. It was an area in which he was fast excelling. He put four rounds into the face and neck of the man who had issued the order, and sent him slamming back into the kicked-open doors. The man's round dark glasses, the lenses smashed, flew into the air as he fell.

The other man drew a laspistol. He started yelling commands into a vox headset, and fired at us.

A las-round blew apart the door jamb beside me, making me yelp and flinch. I looked at Roud. He seemed very calm.

'Please run, Beta,' he said, cheerfully. 'Run the other way.'

Two more shots came at us. Roud turned back to return fire. Only then did I see the small hole in his back, the size of a fingertip. Smoke curled from it. A las-round had passed clean through him.

He fired at the man who had shot him, sinking very slowly to his knees as he did so.

I ran. There was nothing I could do for him, but there was one last thing he could do for me.

I dodged left, into a sub-hall, and then through the drill into the storage area that adjoined the south door.

But that area had been stormed too. I came up short the moment I saw the big old doors, splintered flat on the floor, where some exterior power had

smashed them.

I turned right instead, and made my escape through the cold dank rooms of the old basement kitchens. In doing so, I ran straight into the intruder who had smashed in through the south door.

He was not a man.

He was an it, and it was a box, a great metal box, partly like a throne, and partly like an iron casket. The box hovered above the floor, held up by gravitic mechanisms. It had moved so silently, I had literally run into it and half-fallen across its sloped front.

The metal was warm.

I leapt back, aghast and afraid. I did not know what it was, except that it was another agency of our enemy, and evidently some armoured device for storming a building.

Except, I could feel that it was looking at me. Recessed devices in its bulky armoured integument were perhaps picter lenses or scanning nodes, or perhaps the cones of sensor pods.

And, perhaps, it was more than that. Something more powerful than the most sophisticated human technology.

But if there was any psykana force inside that box, it was helpless. My cuff was *dead*. My raw pariah field was blunting the world around me.

I would not let this thing take me alive.

# CHAPTER 13

*Which concerns the search for sanctuary*

I stepped back from the coffin-throne. Its systems hummed, keeping its vast weight, improbably, off the stone floor. It had an intimidating presence. It made me think of sarcophagi, of the gilded tomb boxes in which the tribes of the Crimson Desert had once buried their dead chieftains. Mentor Murlees had shown me picts of these venerable objects, recovered by antiquarian explorers from long barrows and cylinder vaults out in the dune ocean. The exteriors of the sarcophagi were fashioned in the likenesses of their occupants: a king famous for his hawk nose, a queen beloved for her heartless smile, a prince renowned for his fierce brow and piercing stare.

The prince in this dull, rusting box had been defaced. There was no exterior likeness, or no face to make a likeness from. He was also crippled, and could not rise to his feet from his throne.

This thought more than any troubled me. I knew of only one mighty lord who could never again rise from his Golden Throne, but whose power Saw All and Was All.

For a moment – I blush to admit it – I actually wondered if this was a visitation, if I had been singled out to bear witness to some prophetic annunciation of the God-Emperor Above Us All. Then, of course, I recognised the foolishness of this imagining, the arrogance of it. I was one of a trillion, trillion, trillion souls within the Imperium of Mankind, and to be singled out was in all ways beyond ridiculous. By no conceivable measure was I of any consequence, not even as a promising pupil in an Ordo training facility. No, the coffin-chair was a mindless instrument for smashing open doors and storming buildings. It was a siege engine for

close-combat urban work.

It said something, a blurt of voice noise from hidden speakers. I ignored this. The coffin-throne seemed helpless, and I presumed, gratefully, that its psionic drivers had seized up because of my unlimited blankness. I heard it chatter again, sending and receiving vox-signals. There was someone inside it, a servitor at least. It couldn't tackle me, but it was reporting my position.

I ran, again, back the way I had come. Our enemies had surveyed the Maze Undue well. They had every opening and exit covered. All the principal ones, anyway. But the Maze Undue, old and rambling, *was* a maze after all, and only one who had lived within its walls for years, and had explored its extremities with a child's curiosity, could know all its secret ways.

I ran. Behind me, I heard the ominous coffin-throne purr forwards in pursuit. I turned back through the old basement kitchens, with their dry, lime-scaled sinks and dust-caked work surfaces. Old pots and pans hung from ceiling rails, pots that had never been used in my lifetime.

I did not run all the way back through the kitchens, though. I turned left, into a root store that should have been a dead end. The store had a narrow door, which led to a steep and single descending flight of steps. The coffin-chair simply could not fit to follow me.

Below, in the door-less, window-less store, I pulled aside a heap of mildewed sacking and an old section of panelling, ignoring the wretched soil grubs and beetles I disturbed. Here was a space, a cavity all the youngsters at the Maze Undue eventually learned about if they explored enough. If I bent right down, I could scurry along a little tunnel of dank brick in the dark, pass under part of the south wall, and come out in a section of the skirts we all knew as the stables. There was a street door there, an unremarkable entrance that led down into a corner of Low Highgate Lane. Perhaps this had not been discovered yet.

I was now very low down in the structure of the Maze Undue, deep in its abandoned basements. Still, I could hear, from high above, the whine of the menacing gunships hovering at our eaves, and the thump and crash of intruders. Twice, I heard exchanges of gunfire that made my heart go cold.

Who was fighting? Who was so cornered that they could not simply flee? Who was dying?

The so-called stables were as I remembered them, though I had not been down into their dingy cells for years. We called them the stables for no other reason than in the drab stone chambers there were traces on the walls



and floor where wooden partitions, which had divided the place into stalls, had once been fixed. To the walls were screwed iron baskets into which feed could be deposited.

I came through into the grey twilight of the stables in the hope of reaching the lane door, but realised at once that the space could only be a grey twilight if the lane door was already open, allowing light to fall in.

I kept to the walls, my satchel across my back, the bent silver pin in my hand like a knife.

Three men had come in off the lane, having forced the door. I watched and saw it was in fact two men and a woman. They were dressed like the intruders I had encountered with poor Roud. Their dark clothes were topped with ballistic jack shirts, and they wore round-lensed dark glasses. They carried heavy flash-light instruments, but the devices gave off no luminosity, though they were pointing them into every corner and alcove as they searched. I knew they were mercury vapour lamps, shining with an incandescence beyond the regular visible range. The lenses of their dark glasses allowed them to see whatever their lamps illuminated. The intruders were seeing the world as a cold, electric-blue place.

I had to get past them, all three of them. The lane door was so close. I waited.

One came near, one of the men. I pulled in against a doorway as he came through it, shining his invisible light ahead of him. I held the silver needle down at my side, the spike of it projecting beyond the pad of my palm. With a brisk jerk, I stabbed it into the meat of his thigh at the base of his buttock, below the hem of his body-jack shirt.

He cried out in pain. I felt his blood, hot as caffeine from a stove pot, spurt across my hand as I plucked the needle out. His leg folded under him, requiring him to fall down.

I was already moving, putting my force into a high, rotational kick. Hurt, surprised, and falling over a leg that no longer functioned, he made no defence. My kick connected, turned his face sideways, and cracked his head against the wall behind him. He bounced off this impact and fell flat on his face.

The female was right behind him. I snatched up the mercury vapour lamp the man had dropped, and aimed it in her face. She squealed and leapt back, temporarily blinded. As she reeled, I hit her in the side of the head with the lamp, and put her on the floor.

I wanted to run for the lane door, but the third man was in the passage between me and it. He had heard the commotion, and was turning to charge at me.

I ran back into the Maze Undue, away from the street. The man sprinted after me. The woman got up and came after him.

My headlong flight was not so counter-intuitive. They hadn't cornered me, or driven me back towards others of their kind. My choice of direction had been deliberate. Ten yards down the stable hallway, I passed through a stone archway. My pursuers, close behind me, reached the archway, then both flew off their feet as though they had run into a wire. They slammed onto their backs, twitching and gurgling.

My cuff had cancelled the effects of the pain door built into the archway. They had run directly into its field.

I did not wait. I turned back, picked my way quickly between their spasming bodies, and ran down to the open street door and the grey light beyond.

The rain was still falling, very hard. I stepped into Low Highgate Lane, and smelled the cold damp air, the wet stone, and the trash and soot of the city.

The whole city had been my classroom.

Now Queen Mab would become my hiding place.

# CHAPTER 14

*Which concerns a plan*

I ran through the rain. I urged the night to be my ally.

I followed Low Highgate Lane down to the junction with Tiebone Street, skipped over the vast and muddy ruts that grox carts had worn in the hollow over centuries with their wheels, and continued along Snakepie Lane until I came to the public pump.

Rain had kept most folk indoors, though the commotion from the Maze Undue on the hill above had brought tavern customers out under the awnings to peer up at the aircraft and the searchlights. The huddles muttered, smoked lho and cascade weed, supped, and discussed the moralities of intervention against private citizens. Most of the conversations I overheard supposed that the commotion was a raid by the city watch upon a bordello or narcobaron.

I wondered how private mercenaries could be mistaken for the city watch, but barely had the thought occurred when a troop of watchmen entered the pump yard and began to question the drinkers.

The men of the watch were all big bruisers. They wore black leather doublets and puffed sleeves embroidered with gold and scarlet thread, starched white collars and black felt skull caps. Their ceramite helms were slung from their belts at their hips. Each one carried a pain staff. These were metal devices, which telescoped out to length. All of the staves were extended, ready for use.

I lingered on the far side of the pump, pretending to quench my thirst, using one of the brass cups hanging by a chain from the stone flank of the pump's plinth. I reasoned it out. The forces bedevilling us had shown no

qualms about impersonating the authorities, including the Inquisition. Judika and the Secretary had been very plain about this. Their false credentials and, I'm sure, a simple and understandable fear of the Holy Ordos, had persuaded even the stoic and unimaginative city watch to assist them.

I quit the pump yard, and followed the alleys behind Selvedge Street, crossing the rain-drenched yards of a tannery, a silversmith's shop, and two mechanical repair businesses. I felt sick, quickly crashing after the adrenaline high of my exit from the Maze Undue. My bumps and scrapes, especially my arm and the cut on my head, were beginning to hurt in a way I could not ignore.

'Beta!'

I stopped in my tracks. The voice hissed again. I saw Judika in a doorway, wet and dishevelled. There was bruising on his face and his clothes were torn.

'For Throne's sake!' I exclaimed, coming up to him. He smiled thinly. We faced each other for a moment, and then gave each other a tight hug.

'You got clear,' he said, as the embrace broke.

'Evidently,' I said.

'A terrible night,' he said. 'Terrible, terrible.'

'Do you know who else got out?' I asked.

He shook his head.

'There was so much confusion. It was mayhem.'

'What do you know about it?' I asked.

'Very little,' he said, shaking his head.

'Really?' I replied. 'You were sent back to us to review this situation. The Ordos sent you home because of the Cognitae.'

'Don't use that word,' he said.

'What word should I use then?' I asked. 'A heretic society operates in Queen Mab. It threatens the safety of the Maze Undue so significantly, the Ordos sends an interrogator to watch over us. Then this, whatever this is...'

'The society has moved against the Inquisition,' said Judika. 'Our presence in the city has always been discreet. There is not a permanent office or department. The society evidently believes that by eliminating the training school, it can extinguish all Ordo influence in the city.'

'Is that true?' I asked.

He shrugged.

‘At the worst,’ he said. ‘Only temporarily. If any of the mentors got clear, and I expect they would have done, then they will transmit a report back to headquarters. Assistance will be sent. With some impunity, I would expect. The society has harmed itself by making such a bold and aggressive step against the Ordos.’

‘They can’t be that stupid,’ I said. ‘They must know they have stirred things up. They must be after something else.’

‘Like what?’ he asked. There was slight scorn in the question, as if he sincerely doubted an undergraduate like me could have reasoned something an interrogator such as he could not.

‘Where is the nearest Ordo headquarters?’ I asked. ‘The nearest permanent office?’

‘Not on this world,’ he said.

‘Then,’ I replied simply, ‘it is a matter of weeks or even months before any response will be made. Perhaps that’s what the Cognitae wanted – two or three months without Ordo interruption.’

‘Don’t use that word,’ he said again, with less conviction.

I sighed.

‘We must lie low until help arrives,’ I said.

‘I am rather deprived of options,’ he replied.

The command of *Hajara* was simple. Pupils were to flee the school and become, full-time, whatever role or identity they had been playing in the current function. If necessary, they were to move back through previous identities and function-roles until they found one in which they could live, secure, until help came. I was to become Laurael Raeside, and live as Laurael Raeside until the affair was over.

Judika, unassigned to any function and newly arrived on the planet, had no identity to fall to.

‘You’ll have to come with me, for now,’ I said.

‘I could act as your role’s lifeward,’ he suggested.

‘My main client knows I don’t have one,’ I said. ‘You’ll have to be my manservant. Or my clerk.’

‘Oh, will I?’ he retorted.

‘This isn’t a joke, Jude,’ I said. ‘Enemies are chasing us and trying to kill us.’

He nodded. He knew full well that whatever he became had to fit perfectly with the function-role I had already established.

‘Raeside is a factor,’ I said. ‘You could be a valuer... an assayer...’

He shook his head.

‘I haven’t the time, or the resources, to brief and prepare well enough. I’d make a mistake and be found out. It’ll have to be a footman after all.’

If the Blackwards, or any agency in Queen Mab, or any other person on the world of Sancour, had done any checking on the off-world factor Laurael Raeside, they would have found that she had arrived by interorbital earlier that week, and taken rooms in the Cronhour Helican, a very respectable establishment on Delgado Square, in the embassy district. Preparations of each function were scrupulous, so the reservation existed, even though I had not actually used the rooms. The Cronhour would be our first port of call.

It did not take us long to discover that passage across the city was not going to be easy. The weather had brought Queen Mab to a crawl, but worse still, the city watch was abroad in force. The heretic society’s influence was considerable and rather frightening, or rather the reputation of the Holy Inquisition was. Just the threat of the Inquisition, enforced with fake warrants and rosettes, had been enough to galvanise the watch forces and send them into the streets checking papers and permits. I thought, though I did not tell Judika, for fear of another scornful reaction, that the heretic society might well have members who held prominent offices in the city’s society.

‘We cannot stay on these streets,’ Judika advised as we came up on another checkpoint where watchmen were stopping foot and vehicle traffic to examine permits.

‘We cannot,’ I agreed. We were both dirty, carried minor injuries, and would find it hard to account for the blood on our clothes. Furthermore, we were coming down from the Highgate Hill region.

‘We will take to the holloways,’ I said.

He looked uncomfortable.

‘It is the only way,’ I insisted.

We went back up Palister Walk, across a little park of dead trees and memorial plaques, and clambered over a wall into the holloway that ran down through the Padlock Hill district towards Delgado Square.

It was especially grim and quiet in the empty street of the harrowed path. Rain fell dismally, like a curtain, and the dead buildings all around stared down at us through blind windows. They felt like skulls. It felt like walking

through an ossuary or a bone house, with the blank sockets gazing out from catacombs. I had previously liked the holloways, but now I felt oppressed by them. I suddenly felt how wrong it was to shut up a street of the city and let it atrophy, and how macabre and unnatural an urban thoroughfare becomes when all bustle and life is erased from it.

The sacred paths were a strange and rather twisted expression of piety.

More than that, I felt, with a sudden and great certainty, that once the sacred paths had been established, once they had grown silent and neglected, and had begun to decay into an emptiness of weeds, no one had any business being there.

Especially not us.

Judika became convinced that we were being watched, or even followed. After the night's traumatic happenings, we were both rather deflated by shock, and thus were prey to paranoia.

However, though I dismissed his worry, I felt it too. Eyes were upon us.

'We should get out of here,' Judika said. 'This is not safe.'

'Your mind is playing tricks,' I said, though I did not feel that confident. 'Only the poor warblind wander these streets, and they will not bother us with our cuffs set to *dead*.'

He nodded. He checked his cuff.

'Beta,' he said quietly.

'What?'

He showed me his wrist. At some point during the attic fight, no doubt when the telekine had hurled him around, his cuff had struck something which had buckled its mechanism. It was stuck *live*, and there was nothing either of us could do to move the setting ring.

Judika was limited. He had no blankness with which to render himself invisible to the warblind killgangs.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I should have noticed. I've put us in danger.'

I wanted to tell him he hadn't, but I could not. From the shadows all around, from out of the heavy rain, the warblind were closing in.

# CHAPTER 15

## *Which concerns the warblind*

They came out into the open. They were of forms I had seen so many times before, but always from a distance. Some of them were just feral men, filthy vagrants clad in the ragged remains of Guard uniforms. Others were more obviously enhanced with hardshell plating, augmetic limbs and weapon implants. These were the old ones, the relics of the Orphaeonic War, the true warblind. They stank. Apart from filth, rank chemical odours wafted from them, the toxic secretions and hormones of bodies irrevocably hardwired for aggression. Bioengineering, implants and combat trauma had deranged these creatures. They were blinded by war, and knew nothing except a raging appetite for violence. In wartime, they had been useful berserker weapons. In peacetime, they were bloody, atavistic reminders of a more miserable era.

Worse still, they would not die. The bioengineering that had prepared them for war had included crude juvenat work to improve their durability and healing factors. It had given them unnatural longevity. Consigned to the ghettos and the holloways, the warblind had developed a gang culture, taking in cut-throats and outlaws as retainers, breeding new generations of chemically mutated offspring from lowlife females in the sumps of the city, and leading extended lives punctuated by death that was only ever visited through violence. The war was centuries past. The warblind had outlived everything except the stones of the city. They had outlived even their own purpose.

Two of the big augmetic monsters led the way. They were of the old kind, the veteran kind, and had served in the war at the Saint's side, before



returning to Queen Mab broken with pain. Their gang marks were of the Leach Lane clan. One had a fist made of knives. The other hefted a double-ended battle-axe. Rain dripped off their mail and their tusks.

‘There is no need for this,’ I said in Enmabic. ‘Let us pass.’

I could see they would not. They resolutely would not. Their brains were not wired to allow for such things as mercy or negotiation. They were already goaded, by neural aggression stimulators or chemicals, to a kill-haze. Their human followers, sensitive to the chemical scents, began to tremble and whimper with sympathetic aggression.

We turned and ran, splashing across the flagstones. We got as far as the point where the street widened to accommodate a statue on a plinth (only the plinth and the hooves of the horse that stood on it now remained) and found our way plainly blocked by another wing of the killgang.

As I relate this, matter-of-fact, it may sound as if I was not in terror for my life. I was indeed, and Judika Sowl was too. Going about one’s business in Queen Mab, one never met a person who had tangled with the warblind and lived to tell of it, and there was a reason for that. The killgangs were intractable - they were brutal, and they were said to be anthropophagi. Some said their consumption of human flesh was often cited as one of the reasons they lived such unnaturally long spans, even the ones who were not bioengineered veteran relics of Saint Orphaeus’ War.

We were terrified. We were, I think, beyond terror. Though both of us had experienced dangers and threats in our lives (I cannot fairly account for all that Judika may have known), the night thus far had been the most traumatic either of us had ever lived through. The loss of the Maze Undue, the fate of our fellow candidates, the threat of capture or death... These things had left us numb with shock. Even given the fine training afforded us by the mentors of the Maze Undue, we needed time to rest, to recuperate, to reset our minds.

To be cornered by warblind reavers was almost beyond our capacity for sensation.

Nevertheless, we were trained. We were students of the Maze Undue, practised and rehearsed in methods of combat, infiltration, disguise and all other agency, to make us the most excellent special operatives of the Holy Inquisition, and thus the most excellent and loyal servants of the God-Emperor of Mankind, whose Golden Throne blesses us all.

I was not about to give up. Poor Roud had died, or been mortally hurt, in

order that I might escape. I had caused an enemy to suffer a fatal fall, and had injured others, and I had put supreme effort into evading capture. That effort, and the moral step I had taken, and Roud's sacrifice... I would allow none of those things to be wasted.

I would fight, with a twisted silver pin, if I had to. I simply dismissed the notion that it was a fight I could not win. I knew that, but I ignored it. I needed confidence and clarity, not rational pessimism. I would take down as many of them as I could.

With Judika at my side, I stepped forward as they rushed us. I selected my first target, a dirt-caked man with a billhook. He was not augmented, and therefore not one of the old kind. He was nothing like as much of a threat as the big, plated beast on his right, a howling monster with luminous target-pipper eyes whose voice came from a vox-speaker built into the centre of his chrome breastplate. But I could fell the dirt-caked ganger quickly, with my bare hands, and his billhook would then allow me to strike at arm's length at the greater horrors.

A dirty yellow shape drove into my vision from the right, and knocked down the man with the billhook. The man screamed. A massive cattle dog stood on his torso, jaws clamped around his head. It shook its muzzle, stretching and snapping its victim's spine. Then it leapt at the next warblind attacker, lips peeled back, black gums flecked with spittle.

Its master was close behind it. Deathrow rushed the pack from the side. He was swinging a broadsword, a massive cross-hilted weapon with a dark, oiled blade. He knocked one man down with the sheer mass of his person, and then struck another through the shoulder with his whirring blade. Despite the jack armour he was wearing, the warblind retainer split like a hung carcass in a butcher's shop. There was an alarming release of blood, as though a pail of it had been overturned. The man showed bright white bone and red meat in cross section as he fell in two directions at once.

The broadsword blade did not stick or wedge in a thick bone such as the pelvis as I would have imagined. Deathrow took it with him and, without effort, circled around over his head in a scything cut, dismantling another of the retainers. The blow, crosswise, split the man into four parts in the most gruesome fashion, striking as it did the upper part of his arm below the shoulder. The blade simply did not stop, not for armour, quilting, flesh, muscle mass, arm bones, breastplate, ribcage, heart sac...

It cut him right across. The arterial jets reminded me of the Tyvoke

Fountains in Highgate Park when they are first turned on in the morning. The sword cut his head and shoulders, like a marble bust, from his trunk and legs, and severed both his arms at the middle point of the bicep into the bargain.

The dog, by now, was upon another target, one of the old ones, who was forced back by the animal's feral bulk and ferocious muscle power. The cattle dog turned its gnashing head to the side, so as to bring its large carnassial teeth in like scissors, snipping and shearing at the warblind's front armour.

The Leach Lane retainers fell back in front of the notorious Tusk Slope chieftain, wailing in alarm and locking their shields. Deathrow didn't bother with them. He turned aside, his visor optics buzzing loudly. He came towards Judika and me.

I realised he wasn't making for us at all. The amber cursor of his optic trench was fixed and focused, not upon either me or Judika, but rather on something behind us. I moved aside, shoving Judika with me.

Deathrow engaged the big old ones who had first faced us, and who had come after us when we fled. He clashed with the knife-fisted one first. The impact was like two road vehicles driving into each other head-on. Armour plating buckled and scraped. Augmetic cables and feed tubes tore or split. Fluids, one of them blood, leaked out of seams in their welded bodyplate.

The warblind tried to punch his knife-fist up under Deathrow's guard, but Deathrow head-butted him savagely to break the tight clench, and eviscerated his opponent with a slash of his broadsword as they parted. The veteran's entrails spilled out of his ruptured plate, and most of the matter wasn't organic. Yellow plastic tubes, intestinal augmetics and synthetic processing sacs flopped out like wet rope. The Leach Lane veteran made a subhuman noise through its vox plug, and fell on its back, twitching.

The other, the one with the double-headed axe, put one of those heads into Deathrow as he was occupied, stoving in part of his shoulder guard. Deathrow tilted, planting his feet for a better, braced stance, and led in at the axe-man. One axe-head deflected the first sword stroke, the other put aside the second that Deathrow made. The warblind had a hand gripping each end of the axe haft, near each blade-head, and was switching the weapon like a quarter staff.

Deathrow adjusted, and echoed the style, sweeping in with both the deadly tip and side of his sword blade and, as a counter-stroke, the hefty knob of

the pommel. His left hand, steeled and armoured, gripped the end of the sword blade for leverage each time he swung the pommel in, so that he was using his broadsword in a quarterstaff fashion too, as Mentor Saur had taught me was done in the very old days.

They crossed, locked, and cross-struck again, battering each other's guards to either side with both ends of their weapons. Each blow sounded like someone taking a sledgehammer to the bodywork of a cargo-8.

Judika and I had backed up against the street wall, into the doorway of what once may have been a shrine or temple, before the holloway was blessed and sealed. We were ready to defend ourselves, but the big, ugly cattle dog was taking out the throats of any retainer who ventured to be too brave, and Deathrow's combat kept the veteran warblind back.

'We should run,' Judika stated.

'To where exactly?' I replied. 'There is no way past this.'

'Why is that one fighting for us?' Judika asked.

I could not answer. I wasn't even sure that Deathrow and his dog *were* fighting for us. The warblind fight. They fight anything. They fight one another. That is their way, and their hideous destiny. It was quite possible that we were merely benefitting from Deathrow's regular instinct.

The axe-man landed a blow that cracked across the side of Deathrow's plated skull. Deathrow had evidently had his fill of this battle. He stepped back and rotated his dark sword in a cross-guard stroke. The warblind parried, moving his weapon into a horizontal hold, the haft blocking across his chest. Instead of locking with it again, staff-to-staff as you might say, Deathrow simply heaved an over-arm swing that chopped his blade down the warblind's centreline. The blow cut through the cross-wise haft, cutting it in two, and continued on to slice down the warblind's chest.

The old one staggered back a step, blood and hydraulics leaking from his split breastplate. The halved axe dropped from his hands. Deathrow stabbed, thrusting the broadsword tip-first into the veteran's torso, low down. It went clean through. Deathrow dragged it out – it came loose with a sucking sound and a welter of blood – and stabbed again, this time driving the sword through the warblind's cranium. A second time, he wrenched the blade out. The warblind swayed, jerking. Deathrow drove in a third stab, this one through the chest. The tip of the sword came out through the armoured shoulder blade.

I understood these three strikes. The massive axe-man was a heavy-duty

augmetic, with hard combat reinforcement. Deathrow had destroyed all three of his power plants: the primary at the base of the spine, the secondary in the skull and the tertiary cardiac in the thorax. All three hearts were broken.

The old one fell.

The cattle dog was finishing another retainer, shaking the wretch by the throat so hard his legs flew and flopped. We heard the spinal cord crack as it parted. The dog dropped the mauled corpse. Deathrow stepped forward, swinging his blade across his body in a deft, smooth figure-of-eight. His optics buzzed.

The Leach Lane warblind backed away, mangy retainers and armoured veterans alike.

Deathrow's optics buzzed again. Some kind of understanding was reached.

The warblind melted away into the shadows and the rain, leaving their dead steaming and twitching in the holloway behind them.

Deathrow turned to look at us. His amber cursor flicked to and fro in his visor slit. It buzzed.

The cattle dog, muzzle black with blood, came to sit at his master's side. It growled, and for a second, the growl seemed to swell to make the sound 'Beta'. Again, I say, I would swear this to be the fact of it, though I do not believe in talking dogs.

'Deathrow,' I replied. The cattle dog lowered itself and put its chin on its paws, regarding us with beady black eyes.

Deathrow's optics buzzed. He made a gurgling sound, and then his mouth opened, like a knife-slit in the scar tissue of his face.

'I am pleased to make your acquaintance this day,' he said, in a voice made of centuries and anguish.

I bowed slightly to him.

'Why did you help us?' I asked.

'Because I can see you,' he said.

Then he turned and, with his ugly dog at his side, walked away into the rain.

# CHAPTER 16

## *At Blackwards*

Just before noon the following day, I stood outside the Blackwards emporium on Gelder Street and rang the brass bell. I was Laurael Raeside again.

In truth, there were many other things that I would rather have been doing at that moment than spending several more hours in the fusty old establishment, for there were more weighty matters pressing on my mind. But candidates of the Maze Undue are trained well in the art of developing and maintaining seamless identities, and it was vital that the guise of Laurael Raeside remained intact. There was no function to speak of any more, and it seemed positively ridiculous to waste time considering the prospective purchase of artefacts on behalf of a man who didn't know me and, in a manner of speaking, didn't exist anyway. However, the standing order *Hajara* applied. Laurael Raeside was my lifeline and my sanctuary. I had to protect her so that she could protect me.

That meant I had to do what she would do. Mam Mordaunt always taught us that one of the surest ways to detect a guise, or to see behind a person's mask, was to watch for someone suddenly behaving out of character, or making excuses not to do something expected of them. Laurael Raeside was expected at her appointment that day. She had said she would be there. She could have sent her excuses – an unexpected clash of appointments, a sudden onset of ague or shift sickness, a private matter (I, Beta Bequin, had already dreamed up many for her) – but nevertheless, Laurael Raeside would have broken her promise. She would have behaved *out of character*.

If anybody was watching her, it would be evidence that she was not what

she claimed to be.

I wasn't sure if anybody *was* watching us. I didn't know how thorough or informed our enemies were. The heretic society, whatever Jude chose to call it or not call it, may have been scrupulously well-informed thanks to spies like Sister Tharpe. They may have had likenesses of all the candidates in the Maze Undue, and all the mentors too, and they may have circulated them to their city watch as persons of interest. Judika and I were fairly sure we weren't being surveilled, but we were being careful.

I had not slept well, or for as long as I would have wished. Sometimes, great stress and trauma leads to unexpectedly deep and renewing sleep, but this was not one of those times. I was fretful. The fall of the Maze Undue was an almost unbearable thought, and I worried about all my fellow candidates, and about the mentors too. What had their fates been, I wondered? How many of them had escaped to the comparative safety of a function guise?

I thought, too, of the woman, the telekine. I thought of her falling away from me to her death, her face registering surprise, her purchase stolen by my pariah mind. She had been my enemy, and she had initiated the downfall of the Maze Undue.

But it was not a comfortable memory. I had never imagined myself capable of such a callous action.

It would turn out I had not even begun to discover what I was capable of.

Judika and I had reached the Cronhour Helican late, after our travails in the holloways. We rang at the night door, and a bleary porter let us in and showed us to my suite. Outside, though it was not yet light, street-cleaning servitors were out, sweeping and hosing the gutters of the embassy district. The rain had drawn off. The remains of the night were damp and cold, like a body pulled out of a river.

The rooms were fine, elegant. The porter had no reason to believe I hadn't been living in them for the past few days, as the register said. Judika took a side room, where a footman would sleep, and I occupied the master chamber. I used the line of credit established through a city banking house for Laurael Raeside to contact local businesses and have garments, some medical supplies, and other items couriered to the rooms. We cleaned ourselves up, and patched our injuries. We laid out fresh clothes for the following day: a gown, coat, mantle and hat for me; a gentleman's dark three-piece, as might suit a very well-to-do valet, for Judika.

‘Do you want me to go with you?’ he asked as he brushed his jacket.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I went alone yesterday, so I can go alone today. There are other things you can do.’

He nodded.

‘Procurement of weapons,’ he said.

I looked at him.

‘I had not thought of that.’

‘Then you should,’ he said. ‘We were found once, we can be found again. I am not entirely confident in the prophylactic qualities of Laurael Raeside.’

I did not rise to this jibe. He was baiting me, suggesting that I was incapable of playing the guise for any sustained time without making a mistake. I knew he was frustrated because circumstances had given me the lead role in this.

I also knew he was tired and hurt. He seemed to have become sharper and more cruel than the boy I remembered being fond of, but fatigue was heavy on us both. He was not well, either. He had developed a slight, but persistent cough, due, I imagined, to inhaling the noisome dust during the fight in the attic. I would hear him in his room later, when we were both trying to sleep, coughing intermittently.

‘Get weapons, then,’ I said to him. ‘Do you know where to go?’

‘I have contacts,’ he replied. ‘Thaddeus taught me plenty of places in the Queen where a man might avail himself of a sidearm with no questions asked.’

He spoke of Mentor Saur as if he had been an equal, as if the weapons master had trusted him with knowledge unsuitable for the likes of me.

‘Get your weapons, then,’ I said. ‘Find something for me. A snub weapon, preferably las. And a small blade too.’

‘A dagger?’

‘I mean a sword. I have a slipknife.’

‘You have a bent silver pin too,’ he sneered.

‘Either of which I can use to stop you annoying me,’ I replied. ‘A snub pistol and a small sword. A *cutro*, perhaps. A *marginalle*. Whatever you can find.’

He nodded.

‘The other considerations are important,’ I said. ‘To make an assessment of our situation. That is first. To transmit a report and a request for assistance to the Ordos, that is second.’



‘It’s possible,’ he said. ‘I have key codes. It may take a day or two to arrange discreetly. Off-world communication traffic, such as through the Office of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, will be monitored.’

‘Our enemy’s reach is that pernicious?’

‘Let us assume it is and not be disappointed.’

I considered this.

‘We must begin to reach out to the others,’ I said. ‘I know of some, of the functions they were currently engaged in. If they made it out alive, we could find them—’

‘And blow their cover,’ he snapped. ‘You’d do that, would you? Compromise their identities by attempting contact?’

‘I didn’t mean—’

‘You could get them killed. And us.’

‘We need to know, Judika—’

‘We *wait* to know,’ he replied. ‘We abide by the terms of *Hajara*, and wait for instruction to come from the mentors.’

‘And if the mentors are dead?’ I asked.

‘We wait,’ he said, emphatically. ‘I have authority here, Beta. I am an interrogator of the Ordos, and I know what’s best.’

I shrugged.

‘Whatever else, it should be a priority to get your cuff repaired.’

He glanced down at it.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It will be tricky. It’s specialised work.’

‘It’s essential, nevertheless. We need to be able to use the holloways, and without a cuff, you can’t. We can’t rely on Deathrow to save us next time.’

‘What *was* that about?’ he asked, staring at me.

‘I wish I knew. He’s a strange thing, and he’s taken a shine to me.’

‘His brain is fried,’ said Judika. ‘No doubt he’ll kill you next time he claps eyes on you.’

‘Perhaps he will,’ I said.

And so I stood in Gelder Street and rang the brass bell. The window display had changed. The disturbing mannequin twins had taken up their chairs and gone. In their place, a single and rather ancient quarto volume lay open on a satin cushion, a glass weight holding its delicate pages open.

I went to the window and looked in at it, catching sight of my pale reflection and hoping that the carefully applied make-up concealed my

bruises effectively.

The book was, by my estimation, about four hundred years old, and presented a history of 'Sanctus Orphaeus'. The page that it was opened to was part of the section concerning 'The Eudaemonic War', which I knew was an old name for the Orphaeonic War, or 'Old War' or, merely, 'the war' as all in Queen Mab knew it. The text was vividly illuminated. War machines and augmetic berserks stalked and duelled between the columns of elegant script. The capital letters were formed from mythical animals like unicorns and manticores. The berserks, I guessed, were what became the warblind.

There was a small white card placed at the bottom right-hand corner of the display. It read:

*A History of Orphaeus and  
the Eudaemonic Conflict,*  
publisher unknown, Sancour, 712.M39  
Price upon application

I thought for a moment. 712? That was wrong. Almost *eighteen* hundred years ago? No, a mistake. The war was a thing of history, I knew that. But it had happened a few hundred years before, not eighteen hundred.

'My dear Mamzel Raeside.'

I turned from my inspection to see Lupan, the shopkeeper, waiting for me at the open door. His appearance was, in all ways, identical to the day before. Everything about him was prim, laundered, starched and ironed. His manners were as poised as the solemn, ornamental servitors who fetched us pots of chocolate and plates of iokum.

He was like a doll, I thought, a well-operated puppet. Once that weird notion had entered my head, I couldn't banish it.

I understood it was a consequence of the stress. Mam Mordaunt had taught us that trauma often leaves the mind weak, and particularly susceptible to flights of fancy and imagination, which then further weaken it. It is a downward spiral, and is to be avoided. There were methods. I needed to clear my mind and fortify myself. Sleep would help but, presently, in the Blackwards emporium, that was out of the question. I needed a moment of reflection, of meditation. Lupan was busy around me, eager and attentive, talking about *this* item and *that* curiosity at a headlong rate that suggested

he was a theatrical dummy like the ones I had viewed in the window the day before, his mouth clacking in time to a voice thrown from off-stage.

‘The book in the window display,’ I said.

‘Ah yes,’ he said, ‘the *History*.’

‘It looks intriguing.’

‘It is very fair work, mamzel,’ he agreed, ‘though I was not aware your employer had a particular interest in books.’

‘In *age*,’ I said. ‘You pointed out that he is interested in age. The book, I believe is eighteen centuries old.’

‘It is.’

‘Rare for a thing made of paper.’

‘By all means you may look at it,’ he said.

I told him I would. I knew that it would take him some time to fetch it out of the window, and that would allow me a space to sit alone, in the quiet, and clear my head.

He was gone fifteen minutes or more. I unpinned my hat, took off my gloves and mantle, and undid the buttons on my long coat. It was stuffy, but oddly cool in the emporium, the result of various environment systems. I sat upon a high-backed Orphaeonic chair with ball and claw feet, and closed my eyes, slowing my breath rate, and focusing on my tempering litany. During our induction training, all candidates were encouraged to develop one of these. It was simply a mind-tool, a focus mechanism that allowed us to meditate. We each chose a calming memory, perhaps the image of a place from childhood, or the words of a favourite hymn or Ecclesiarchy verse. Sometimes, our litanies would involve a particular person. I know that Faria’s had been her twin sister, who had died when she was very young, singing the nursery rhyme ‘The High Lords Came Unto the City’.

Mine was a passage from *The Heretikhameron*, or ‘Days of Heresy’, a long verse poem written circa M32, which recounts the War of the Primarchs. I never read it all, and it was tortuously complex, but I remember the grand style of the opening book, with all its epic images and its declamatory tones, speaking of the ‘Bright Emperor’, and the Nine Sons Who Stood, and the Nine Who Turned. Sister Bismillah used to read it to me in the dormitory of the Scholam Orbus. I think the orphanage only had the first book in a little yellow volume. Anyway, my tempering litany is not just those words, it is Sister Bismillah’s voice reciting them. She is, I suppose, the most maternal influence I have ever known in my life, so her soft voice

was an important part of it.

It worked, and I was soothed. I sat for a while longer in silence, then took a sip of the very good chocolate that Master Lupan's servitors had brought. I toyed with the silver pin that I had used to fix my hat, running the tip of my finger along the slight kink in it.

A servitor appeared, with a whirr like a carriage clock's action, and made a bow. They did not speak, the servitors at Blackwards. It beckoned me. I took up my hat, my gloves and my mantle and went after it. A long, dark hall, lined with the mounted and stuffed heads of all manner of horned ungulates, presently brought me to a fine, circular chamber lined with green velvet, where Lupan was waiting.

In the centre of the room was a round table covered by a clean white cloth. On the cloth sat the book, open, on a wooden rest. Two servitors, fitted with glass hands, waited to turn the pages for me. On a sideboard, other books were waiting in special archive boxes.

'I took the trouble of selecting a few other volumes, mamzel,' said Lupan. 'Others that I thought you might enjoy if this one appealed to you. They are of similar age, or greater.'

I leaned in to look at the history.

'Here you may see,' Lupan said, as the servitors slowly turned the pages, 'accounts of the great campaign.'

'The publication date intrigues me, sir,' I said. '712.M39 it says, quite clearly. How could this book have been published before the war it records occurred?'

'Why, mamzel, it was not.'

'But I was—' I stopped myself. I had nearly misspoken and said *raised to understand*, which would have been an error, and would have betrayed my local connections. 'I was given to understand that the Orphaeonic War took place but a few hundred years ago. Three hundred, I think.'

Lupan then said the most curious thing. He said, 'History tends to repeat itself, lady. There have been eudaemonic wars in this part of the Subsector Angelus on and off for five thousand years. Perhaps more. They become interchangeable. They blur in the public record until they are all "the war".'

'But surely—'

He smiled patiently.

'The Blackwards have been here for a long, long time, mamzel. The family knows these things. Sancour has lived through many wars. It is

always recovering in the aftermath of a war. And all wars become the same war.'

'But the Saint? Saint Orphaeus, who led us to victory—'

'All saints become the same too,' he said. 'Eudaemonia, my lady. The wars of good daemons. We fight such wars all the time. We build angels to face down the dark. One day, they will not just beat the dark back, but they will conquer it entirely. Angels, mamzel. This is the Angelus Subsector after all.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'Nor should you. No one should, except the most exalted and illuminated. A new Orphaeus comes along every few generations, blessed by visions and perceptions beyond mortal men. He raises armies from Sancour and its neighbour worlds to fight his new war, though in truth it is just a continuation of the same war. No one questions his authority. A mere word from Orphaeus silences any objection from a planetary governor or subsector lord. Such is the power of an Orphaeus to charm souls and change men's minds with words alone. And why would anyone oppose his will, for his war is a just cause. It is a holy war, a struggle to reclaim and purify the soul of mankind. A perpetual war. A war that must always be fought at the sacred heart of mankind.'

He looked at me. He must have seen the perturbed look upon my face. His manner changed abruptly. He seemed embarrassed.

'Mamzel, forgive me,' he said. 'I have run on. I have spoken out of turn. I—I meant no offence.'

What offence did he believe he had given me? I was showing only bafflement. What was he reading in my face? What was he expecting to see there?

'I merely intended to reassure you,' he said.

'To reassure me?'

'That you have allies. At this time.'

'Allies, Master Lupan?'

He floundered.

'That is to say, I merely wished to make my comprehension plain to you. I wanted to show that I understood. I placed the book in the window this morning after, I mean to say, last night's occurrences. I thought, perhaps rashly, it would give you an opening if one were required.'

'An opening, Master Lupan?'

'To— that is to say, to broach the subject. Blackwards would never interfere

with the programme. We have always been supporters of the King. But if things have changed, if circumstances have altered, and more active assistance is required... perhaps a hiding place, or escort to a safer world...'

'Master Lupan, I have no idea what you are referring to,' I said.

He looked at me. It was a pained, uncomfortable look, like a suitor who has finally plucked up the courage to make his overture to a lady, only to be smartly rebuffed. He was embarrassed, but his pride was hurt.

'Of course,' he said, bowing. 'Of course not. Of course you don't. It was most improper of me to even mention the matter. I thought— that is to say... Never mind. Forgive me for being inappropriate. I assure you that Blackwards prides itself on its discretion, and I fear I have rather betrayed the emporium's codes of conduct. I have been too frank—'

He broke off. A bell was ringing from somewhere deep in the emporium. A hand bell, ringing for attention. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'I must briefly attend to that. I will return directly. Please, continue to study the book at your leisure. The servitors will bring you fresh chocolate, or some solian tea. I promise you I will be back directly.'

He hurried out. The servitors straightened up and looked at me.

'Tea,' I said, and they strode away.

I was alone. Lupan's behaviour had been most peculiar, and he had mentioned things I had no knowledge of, but I recognised the form of his conversation. It had been a test. A clumsy, and ill-considered test, but a test all the same. He had spoken of things, perhaps using coded terms, that he expected me to know about and recognise. It was an invitation for me to respond to him in kind, to establish a mutual understanding of secret matters. He had not got the reception he wanted. Perhaps his masters, the mysterious and unseen members of the Blackwards family, had been clandestinely watching us, and the bell had summoned him to be rebuked.

What did he think I was? There was one phrase he had used that especially troubled me. *After last night's occurrences.*

I had to get out. As soon as he returned, I would make my excuses and leave, craving his understanding for a prior appointment Laurael Raeside could not avoid.

While I waited for him to reappear, I walked around the table and looked at the books on the sideboard, the other volumes he thought might appeal to me.

*To me.* That's exactly what he had said. He'd taken the liberty of selecting

other books that might appeal to me, not to the tastes of my employer.

I turned each one over in its archive case. *A Life of Orphaeus. A History of the Governorship of Sancour, and the Rule of Man in the Angelus Subsector.* A drama called *The King in Yellow.* A treatise on the use of masks, and another on the meaning of identity...

There were many of them, mostly obscure. One was a very small volume, bound in blue, with no exterior marks. I opened its case and took it out. It was a notebook, with yellowing pages, handwritten. It would not, I feel, have looked out of place among the Secretary's notebooks. It was handwritten in brown ink, in a tight and perfect hand. I could not read it, because the script was in some kind of cipher, or else a language I did not know. But on the inside front cover was a number – 119 – and the following words, written in Enmabic:

*Commonplace writings of Lilean Chase;  
of her knowing (that is, of her Cognitae)*

I blinked. The word was clear.

'He's coming back,' a man's voice said from the shadows. 'You should be gone from here, or else he will seize you.'

I turned, startled. A man stepped from the shadows of the doorway. He was pale-skinned, but darkly bearded. His hair was long, tangled and black, and fell about his collar. His clothes were dark too. He looked at me with grey eyes that were neither friendly nor unfriendly, but simply were.

'Who are you?' I asked.

'He were trying to take you delicate,' the stranger said, nodding his head very slightly in the direction of Lupan's exit. 'But he misjudged it. Nevertheless, they mean to have you. You are merchandise. So, if I was you, I'd go before he come back and is less delicate.'

'Who are you?' I repeated.

'Just now,' he said, 'I'm the only friend you've got.'

*The second section of the story,  
which is called*

## A DESIRED COMMODITY

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# CHAPTER 17

## *Of Renner Lightburn*

I fixed him with an unfriendly stare. I did not like the look of him. He appeared lowborn, which is not a failing of itself, for I know I am lowborn, but he seemed tempered with that uncouth and uncivil rawness that one only finds in the roughest of street dwellers.

‘What is your name?’ I asked.

‘I ain’t have no name,’ he replied.

‘Nonsense,’ I replied. ‘Everyone has a name.’

‘I had a name once,’ he said. ‘But not no more. For I am Curst.’

The Curst usually wore their markings plainly, on their cheeks or throats, but I had seen none. Except, now I looked, perhaps there were some. At the line of his cuff, where the pale skin of his wrist showed against the black of his coat jacket, there was a hint of black lines, a wiry tangle that I had taken to be the hairs on his arm, but which could well be the skin-ink of his station.

And it was a low station. Few in Queen Mab, or elsewhere, are as lowly as the Curst. Perhaps the warblind, for they are the trash of society, though the warblind at least retain some feral pride in their original martial purpose.

‘So, you are Curst,’ I said. ‘So why are you come here? Why are you present in this fine emporium where you have no business being? And why do you make an approach to me, a mamzel of society who—’

‘I am here because I am sent,’ he replied, clearly not bothering to hear me finish. His grey eyes looked me up and down. He was tall, and his straggly black beard occupied the point of his chin and joined with a moustache. His tangled hair was centre-parted. His skin looked as if it had not seen sunlight

in a long while, though he did not seem especially filthy. I have heard of, and seen, Curst burdeners who neglect themselves in the most pitiable ways, who renounce washing and other general hygiene in order to hasten the pace of their burden. The neglect is a form of shriving, a chastisement.

‘I will have none of this,’ I said. ‘I am busy here and—’

‘And I will have none of your yap,’ he said. ‘I was sent here to fetch you, and bring you to a particular place. For safety. It’s become part of my burden, so I can’t deny it. I was told I’d find you here, and here you are. I am just in time, I think, because listening to what passed here before, I can tell you that fellow means you trouble. He wants you for what you are. Them Blackwards, they want you. Now come along with me.’

‘Who sent you?’ I asked.

‘She said that if I called her Eusebe, you would know who I meant.’

I started. Could Mam Mordaunt really have sent this Curst man to fetch me?

I turned, hearing someone approach. When I looked back, the Curst had gone. He had vanished, I presumed, back into the doorway shadows, with startling effect.

Four of the emporium’s servitors entered through the opposite doorway, from the direction in which Lupan had disappeared. Lupan was not with them. They were escorting a person I had not seen before.

He was an ample man, not fat, but showing the tight-skinned look of an individual who wants for nothing and dines well every night. He wore a blue suit with a raised golden collar, and his head, shaved of all hair, and oiled, was held up so that, though he was no taller than me, he affected to look down his nose at me nonetheless.

‘Mamzel Raeside,’ he said. ‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Balthus Blackwards.’

He extended his hand. I took it, and made a curtsey. I noted the device marked on the gold pinky ring he wore. I also noted the tiny bump on the band of the ring on his index finger. A power-cell, or a venom reservoir. The index finger ring, with its heavy memento mori death’s-head motif, was a digital weapon.

‘I was just speaking to your fellow, Lupan,’ I said.

‘I have withdrawn Lupan for the day,’ Balthus Blackwards replied. ‘He is a good man, but only a junior. I fear we may have offended you by not conducting our business with you through a more senior representative of

the house.'

'I was not at all offended, sir,' I replied. 'He was most attentive and informative.'

'You are too kind,' he said, 'but I think Blackwards rather underestimated the importance of the party you represent. I venture it is only fitting that a member of the Blackwards family attend you in person.'

'I am honoured,' I said.

'Allow me to conduct you through to the private reading room,' he offered. 'The surroundings are more comfortable, and we can have some really rare volumes brought up from the environment store.'

Though I had not spoken to him for long enough to properly sample his inflection and get a true base line, I could read the tension in his voice. There was something preparatory about it. That was not the real giveaway, however. The real giveaway was the manner in which he and the servitors were placed.

It was a subtle thing, but it was plain to me. Blackwards was a little too close. After taking my hand, he should have gone back a step to a more respectful distance for conversation, but he had stayed close. The servitors appeared to be flanking him, but a high-function servitor like these places itself very precisely, according to heuristic encodements and the owner's operating preferences. For example, when escorting, always a metre from the left or right of the owner's elbows, and always a pace behind, and always parallel to the companion servitor on the other side. When there are four, formation is maintained, a synchronicity of movement. These devices are expensive, and it simply looks more impressive if they move in a perfectly harmonious manner with their owner. The servitors had done so before, during my visit the previous day, and earlier, with Lupan, they had coordinated all their movements around us perfectly and symmetrically.

These four were not doing so. The two to Blackwards' right hand were both a step too far back, suggesting they were ready to block the door he had entered by. The two to his left were entirely out of line, almost flanking me rather than him. The lack of symmetry was perhaps explained by the circular nature of the green velvet room: Blackwards' position relative to the curve of the wall meant they could not stand in exactly equivalent places to the pair on the right.

To me, however, trained by Mentor Saur to watch for – and sometimes conduct – deployments and overwhelms, they were hemming me in,

blocking my direct line to the other doorway and almost encroaching from behind me.

This I read and noted in a second, just time enough for Blackwards to extend his arm to show me the way, to tilt his head, to say, 'Mamzel?'

There was a tiny whirr, like the mechanism of a long-case clock preparing to strike the hour. The servitor that had edged most fully behind me moved. Blackwards was the distraction. I could not entirely turn in time, but I snapped around, and brought the object I was holding up as a shield.

It was the little blue book, the commonplace book of Lilean Chase. I got it as high as my throat, like a fan. The servitor was stabbing in with the needle of a syringe built into its middle finger. The porcelain sleeve of the finger had drawn back to expose the needle fitting.

The book barely blocked it. The needle wedged through the cover and the thickness of the pages, and the tip came out through the other side. I saw a tiny bead of fluid wink at the needle's tip.

But for the book, it would have struck my neck, and that fluid, whatever it was, would have been injected into my bloodstream.

Poison? Paralysing toxin? Tranquilliser? Truth serum? It didn't matter. Someone had just tried to stick a needle in my jugular.

I wrenched the book aside, and the motion sheared the digit clean off, leaving the needle embedded through the volume. The servitor made to grab me, so I elbowed it in the face, cracking its mask. It lurched back a step.

The others rushed me.

I ducked the reaching hands of one, and tried to kick out to disable another, but Laurael Raeside's gown impeded me. Her clothes were not designed for close combat. I almost stumbled, constrained by the width of the skirt. A servitor grabbed me by the shoulder.

'Restrain her!' Blackwards cried.

'I recommend no such thing,' said a voice.

It was the Curst. He had reappeared in the doorway, emerging into the light. His face was set. He was looking directly at Balthus Blackwards, who started in surprise to find another person present.

The Curst was aiming a pistol.

It was a huge, chromed thing, a revolver with two barrels, one of a regular size and a second of greater bore beneath it. It was an old, Guard-issue weapon, a Lammark Combination Thousander, a weapon for an officer, or for use in trench-war and street fighting.

The Curst thumbed the hammer back.

‘I *recommend* it,’ he said.

‘You have made the most appalling mistake, my friend,’ Blackwards hissed.

‘No, you’re wrong,’ said the Curst, his aim unwavering.

‘How so?’

‘I don’t have no friends at all,’ the Curst replied.

He fired. The pistol boomed painfully in the confines of the chamber, and the bullet blew the head off the servitor who was grasping me. Pieces of its shattered cranium bounced off the green velvet wall.

I moved, tearing free from its dead clutches, and barged a second servitor aside with my shoulder. The one that had attempted to inject me rushed at the Curst, and he killed it with two more deafening shots. The bullets went through its torso plating.

Blackwards yelled out a profanity, and raised his hand to despatch the Curst with whatever lethal mechanism lurked in his ring-weapon. I reacted instinctively, because he was within my reach. I smashed the book – which I was still holding – into his hand to dislodge his aim. His shot, a micro-slim beam of plasma, streaked across the room, and burned a hole in the wall. The chamber was suddenly filled with the stench of smouldering velvet.

Blackwards stumbled away, and looked down at the back of his hand in dismay. There was a tiny red weal, like a flea bite, between his knuckles, where the needle transfixing Lilean Chase’s book had punctured his skin.

His mouth moved, chewing the air, but no words came out. His eyes bulged. He gagged, and then he collapsed heavily, overturning the side-board.

The two servitors still intact faltered, torn between conflicting responses: to follow recent commands and restrain me, or to obey deep-set defaults and see to their master.

As they dawdled, the Curst motioned to me.

‘Past time we found the door out of here,’ he said.

We moved together along the hallway out of the room. Hand bells were ringing all around. We could hear running footsteps and a general commotion. A servitor came out of a side passage in front of us, and the Curst punched it out of our way with the butt of his hefty pistol. Its face broke as it fell down. I paused to hitch up my skirts so I could run more

adequately.

‘Did you come in the front or the back?’ I asked.

‘The back,’ he replied. ‘They wouldn’t let the likes of me in the front way.’

‘Then why are we heading towards the front?’

‘The back’s teeming,’ he replied.

Another servitor appeared. The Curst raised his pistol in a two-handed brace and fired off two shots that blew out its head and neck. The cylinder of the revolver carried ten shots of standard ballistic ammo. An eleventh, larger-calibre chamber was centred in the cylinder’s axis, and discharged through the fatter of the gun’s two barrels. For now, the Curst was firing standard ammunition.

We leapt over the fallen servitor, ran through a sales room, and hurried down another passageway towards the front door. This was the door out into Gelder Street.

It was very firmly locked.

Behind us, a large number of servitors had gathered and were advancing on us.

‘Stand back and cover your face,’ said the Curst.

He adjusted his revolver, switching the hammer to the centre chamber, and aimed it at the door.

The Lammark’s centre chamber was a large-capacity slot for a buckshot cartridge or a breaching round. He had loaded the latter. The under-barrel fired with a deeper, more painfully leaden bang than the narrower upper muzzle. The breaching round shredded the entire area around the door handle, mangling the latch and the electrically fired deadbolts.

He kicked the broken door open and we ran outside.

Suddenly, he was walking, stuffing the pistol out of sight under his coat.

‘Walk,’ he said. ‘Walk.’

I fell in step beside him.

Passers-by had retreated from the exploding door, and there was a general commotion and alarm. Servitors spilled out into the street, heads turning, training their audio and optic receptors. A crowd was gathering, drawn by the fuss.

We walked into it, heads high, calm, as though we had nothing to do with anything. The only thing about us a person might comment on was the fact that we weren’t stopping to gawk like everyone else.

The servitors did not pursue us. Bells and whistles told us the city watch

was coming. Blackwards did not want to get involved in a public debacle. Its clientele valued discretion and privacy. They were not likely to frequent an establishment where scandal and upset occurred.

We walked down Gelder Street, crossed Pandovar Lane, and then turned into Besk Lane. An iron-barred gate was open into the yard of a laundry, and we stopped there, just inside the wall, where we could not be seen.

I realised I still had the little blue book. I plucked the syringe fitting out of it, and sniffed the tip of the needle.

‘Tincture of Morpheul,’ I said. ‘They were trying to put me to sleep. I am rather glad I did not poison and kill the Blackward.’

‘When he wakes up, he’ll be sore enough,’ said the Curst. ‘You can expect to see him again.’

I tossed the broken syringe aside and tucked the book away.

‘Thank you for your assistance,’ I said.

‘It’s not over,’ he replied. He was carefully reloading his Thousander, which was split open so he could fill the drum with shells from his coat pocket.

‘I have no need of—’

‘I’m to take you to Eusebe. That was what she told me.’

‘Just tell me where she is, and I will go to her,’ I replied, ‘Just—’

‘She didn’t tell me whether I should let you know that information or not, so I will take you instead,’ he decided.

‘I insist that—’

‘You’re not obliged to insist. That’s the way it will be.’

‘Will you ever let me finish a *single sentence*?’ I asked.

He said nothing, which was more annoying.

I turned and walked away. He snapped the pistol closed, tucked it away, and set off after me.

‘Will you stop following me?’ I snapped.

‘I will not.’

‘I have no need of this—’

‘You have it anyway,’ he said. He had caught up with me. He was tall, and even walking, his long stride covered a lot of ground. ‘I have to deliver you to the woman. That’s my burden, and I will carry it out, though you like it or not.’

I stopped and looked at him.

‘Sir, I appreciate the seriousness of a Curst man’s burden,’ I said, ‘but you

are becoming a problem to me. Could you tell me where Eusebe is, and then perhaps leave me alone?’

He shook his head.

He did not seem a bad person, but his single-mindedness was frustrating. The Curst, if you do not know, are a very low-caste type of penitent. They are men, or sometimes women, who have committed some great sin. If they choose to face the judgement of the Ecclesiarchy courts, rather than the civil ones, they accept the weight of their crimes, and embark upon a lowly life of atonement as a burdener, or ‘Curst’. This means they must live their lives on the streets, surviving by charity and alms, and doing all they can, for all their lives, to help others. This means serving or assisting others, without question or hesitation. Every action they take to assist another takes a little away from the burden they carry, and so forms part of their atonement.

In extreme cases, this has led to them being almost outside of the law, pariahs in the old sense of the word. The ethical logic runs that the greater the burden of others they can ease, the more their own burdens are reduced, even if the burden of others is a dark one. So, a man might be troubled by a desire to avenge himself on another man. A Curst man, or burdener, would exact that vengeance for him, sparing the man the guilt and crime. The business of the vengeance does not matter to the Curst; what matters is the great moral weight he has spared the other man. This selflessness counts against the equity of his own, original sin.

So the Curst take on the curses and crimes of others, to diminish their own burdens. Often, they will write their own crime, and the crimes they have accepted on behalf of others, on their skins in ink. They absolve the wrongs, the crimes, the evils and the sins of others by taking them on and carrying them as their own.

In the slums of Queen Mab, the Curst can become, in effect, unpaid mercenaries, for they are willing to do anything for any man; even the worst crime is redemptive for them.

‘I can’t let you be,’ he said, ‘until I have done what I said I would do. That’s just the way of it, whether you like it or not.’

‘So I am to be part of your shriving?’ I asked.

‘That is how it must be.’

I sighed.

‘Then take me to her. But do as I tell you. First, we will go by way of the



Cronhour.'

'We will do no such thing,' he replied.

'Yes, we will,' I said. 'I am with another person that the lady who sent you will want to see. We must collect him. Be thankful I am cooperating this much.'

He shrugged.

'What is your name?' I asked.

'I told you, I don't have no name. I am—'

'Curst. I know. I refuse to call you that. What was your name?'

'I was Renner Lightburn,' he replied, 'a long time ago.'

'I didn't think the Curst were supposed to carry weapons, Mr Lightburn,' I said, 'especially powerful firearms.'

He shrugged again.

'I see as how I can do as I like. It won't make my burden heavier. I can't be any more cursed.'

I did not find this announcement especially reassuring.

# CHAPTER 18

*Which is spent travelling back in time*

We went to the Cronhour Helican. It was, by then, mid-afternoon. The threat of rain hung over Queen Mab, but the rain itself failed to materialise. The clouds were very dark, and banked steeply like mountainsides, filling the sky. They looked like a city too, a city of towers and walls and high ramparts, shown in silhouette, or a shadow of Queen Mab somehow cast against the backdrop of the sky. I was reminded of the City of Dust, which is a famous myth of the Hercula prefecture. The City of Dust is said to lie out to the north-east, towards the Sunderland, out in the direction of the great emptiness that is the Crimson Desert. It is said that Queen Mab was once one of a pair of cities that stood side by side, and that the City of Dust is all that remains of the missing twin.

I fancied I could see its outline upon the heavens.

We slowed our approach to the Cronhour on the far side of Delgado Square, trying to remain anonymous in the moderate foot traffic of the embassy district. I made us walk past the place one way, and then go back along the other way, without approaching it directly.

‘Stay here,’ I told the man, Lightburn.

‘I don’t believe I shall,’ he returned.

‘For Throne’s sake!’ I snapped. ‘I will not take you into that place. An escort such as you will not fit the role I am playing.’

I gave him a generous handful of change from my purse.

‘Go into the dining house here, sit at a table near the window, and order a pot of caffeine. Watch for me. I will come back.’

The Curst looked dubious, as if this was some means of me giving him the

slip. In all honesty, I had considered it, but I was too anxious to make use of his connection to Mam Mordaunt.

I handed him the little blue book I had acquired at Blackwards. It had, in all probability, saved both our lives in inadvertent manners since I had first picked it up. It was not a thing I wanted to lose.

‘This is valuable,’ I told him. ‘I want time to study it later, for I feel it may be useful. Look after it for me while I go to my rooms. It pretty much guarantees I will come back to find you.’

He looked at the book, pursed his lips thoughtfully, and then put it away inside his coat.

‘If you do not show again in an hour,’ he said, ‘I will come in.’

I left him at the dining house and crossed the square. Rain still threatened. I had a key to the night door, but during daylight hours, Laurael Raeside would use the front.

Children had been playing in the street just down from the Cronhour’s gate. They had chalked a pattern on the paving stones to skip across.

Or that’s what anyone passing by would think.

I saw the formation. A basic code, taught to us by Mentor Murlees, giving instruction that a site was not safe, or had been compromised.

Judika had left this warning for me. Our enemies, dogged and persistent, had already traced us to the Cronhour.

I went back to the dining house and found Lightburn.

‘That took no time,’ he said.

‘We’ll be on our way now,’ I said.

This puzzled him. He got up and followed me back onto the street.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked.

He hesitated.

‘Now we’ve run your errand,’ he replied, ‘we do things my way.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘My friend was not there. He has moved on. We still have to find him.’

Lightburn sighed.

‘Where?’ he asked.

‘A book-binders on Feriko Street, near Toilgate.’

The commandments of *Hajara* were perfectly straight-forward. One retreated to one’s previous role or identity, and if that proved false, then to the one before it. Laurael Raeside was compromised, so I had to fall back promptly to the function I had undertaken before that, and resume that role

for as long as it was viable. Judika knew this. I had briefed him on my last few functions, just in case.

I was, however, concerned that we had been discovered so swiftly. I was quite certain we had not been followed back to the Cronhour Helican. It suggested that someone, perhaps someone captured during the raid on the Maze Undue, had given away the likely locations of those fleeing at the *Hajara* order.

The most alarming part of this was that only a few people knew enough about the functions to have confessed them. Only the mentors knew the function placements of the candidates. I could not imagine any of them, not even Mentor Murlees, breaking down under interrogation. I shuddered to think what techniques must have been used to achieve such a thing.

Before I had been sent out as Laurael Raeside, I had been assigned to function as an assistant at a book-binders on Feriko Street. I had used the name Blide Doran. When we approached the bindery, I saw once again, the innocuous chalk markings of a children's pavement game outside.

We turned aside.

A step back from Blide Doran was Sero Hanniver, a mamzel's companion, who had filled a place at the house of the Tevery family for a month. We skirted back that way, along Solarside to the grand residences on Chieros Walk. The rain began to fall at last.

The rain, though brisk, had not quite erased the chalk marks on the wall outside Tevery House.

Lightburn was growing impatient. He did not quite understand what we were doing, or why it should matter. For my part, it felt as though I was travelling backwards through time, fleeing from one past identity to the next, only to have to flee again. I was falling into my own past, reacquainting myself with people I had never expected to be again.

It was highly disconcerting. I was also fearful of the reach of my enemies. Just one day after the vicious attack on us, and they had broken one or more of the mentors, and reached back into our secrets to uncover the circumstances of our past assignments. I tried to remember how far back I had gone when telling Judika about past functions. Three, perhaps, or four? At the time, that had seemed a generous safety margin. Now I was afraid that we would run out, and Judika would have no means of contacting me.

Padua Prate had come before Sero Hanniver. I was fairly sure I had told Judika that much. If Prate, like Laurael Raeside, Blide Doran and Sero

Hanniver, was unviable, Judika would not know where to go next.

Lightburn the Curst was becoming truly frustrated.

‘Now where?’ he asked.

‘A commune on Lycans Street, behind the Toilgate almshouses.’

Padua Prate had worked as an artist’s model at the commune for three weeks, while training under the hue-makers to learn the trade of mixing paint pigments. The function had been arranged in order to watch an artist called Constant Shadrake. Certain symbology had appeared in some of his recent works, and the Secretary’s instruction was to observe him and discover if he had fallen in with heretically minded persons, or acquired some proscribed work that had inspired him. I had found nothing. The symbols proved to be coincidental echoes.

During my time as Padua Prate, I had lived with the other juniors, helpers and models in the commune’s crumbling residence, which was no more than a squat.

The commune had been established in an old plating works on Lycans Street. Six or seven artists had set up their ramshackle studios there, and the area itself was an artistic enclave.

By the time we arrived, it was raining heavily. If there had been chalk marks outside the place, the rain had long since washed them away.

I wavered. I did not want to lose my connection with Judika, and this was the last chance to maintain it.

We went inside.

The place was as I remembered it. On the ground and first floors, large rooms had been converted into rambling studios, with faded drapery hung from the walls and old rolls of carpet, overlaid, upon the floor. Furniture and other props were stacked around, and the carpets were much bespattered with paint. Tables, shelves, chairs and easels were similarly caked in splatterings of the stuff, and the area was piled about with the tools and instruments of the artist’s trade. Windowsills were lined with pots and jars of dirtied water and oil, and boxes filled with rags sat under trays of paint pots, palettes, tincture mixtures and many, many vessels stuffed with brushes. The air was heavy with the stink of mixing oils and other spirit agents, and thick with the pungent scents of the mineral powders being ground and mixed by the hue-makers in the pigment shops upstairs.

No one was at work. It was late afternoon and the light was bad, and in my experience, by this time of day, most of the artists would have retired to the

local inns or up to their attic rooms with pouches of lho weed.

Lightburn sniffed dismissively. Paintings, some drying, hung along the walls of the hall and corridors, and none impressed him. There was other work done here: prints, sculpture, miniatures and some pictographic work, but I didn't see any point in trying to express this to him. Renner Lightburn evidently saw life in a simple, practical way, a view that allowed no room for art.

To be fair to him, most of the art was only adequate at best. The commune was a working studio for commercial portraiture. Some of the residents had loftier aspirations that were unlikely ever to be realised. Only Shadrake had any proper talent. I wondered if he was still a resident.

The top floor of the buildings was a false floor built across the massive rafters of the old plating works. It was here, in areas divided and demarcated by dirty curtains and other makeshift hangings, that the models, assistants, hue-makers and other juniors of the commune, along with friends and hangers-on, lived and slept.

We went up. The place was empty, except for a few slumbering youths and an old woman boiling a tin kettle on a burner stove. The space that Padua Prate had once occupied had been taken over by another person, but I soon found a vacant place. I knew how it worked. Newcomers just took the next empty space available.

The space was near the eaves, and had a couple of dirty mattresses and an old, green silk curtain that could be pulled across on a rail.

'Here?' Lightburn asked.

'We'll wait here, and watch for my friend,' I told him.

He sat down on one of the mattresses. He looked unconvinced and ready, at any moment, to leave.

After a few minutes, I spied Lucrea, a young model and hue-maker, who had been living there when I had been Padua Prate. She was thinner than I remembered. I went to greet her, leaving Lightburn where he was, glaring after me.

'Padua?' Lucrea cried. 'You came back!'

She seemed delighted to see me, though there was a haze of lho in her eyes.

'A job didn't work out,' I said, 'so I thought I'd move back. Constant still here?'

She nodded.

‘He mentions you sometimes. He had his eye on you. He’ll be pleased you’ve returned.’

Shadrake was an unsavoury sort, and had a reputation for treating his models as playthings before discarding them.

‘He can keep his hands to himself,’ I said.

‘He still pays well for someone who can sit as well as you,’ she said. ‘You should use him. Use his interest to further yourself.’

I shrugged. I could tell from her tone that she had either been abused and discarded by Shadrake, or was unhappy that she hadn’t yet caught his eye. I feared that this was because she was already too thin and pale for him. Poverty, poor diet and the lho had begun to spoil Lucrea’s looks and waste her away. Shadrake liked his girls, and boys, rather more healthy-looking, with a rude vigour to them. If their looks were to be ruined, and their youth stolen, he would do the ruining and stealing himself.

‘Has anyone else been asking after me?’ I asked her.

‘A few did,’ she said, ‘after you went away so suddenly.’ She mentioned the names of a few others in the community, who had become Padua’s friends during her stay. ‘No one recently.’

I nodded.

‘Where are your clothes come from?’ she asked, suddenly interested. ‘Look at you now! So fancy and fine!’

Though they were damp, and now dirty, I was still clad in the garments of Laurael Raeside.

‘These?’ I said, looking down at myself. ‘I can’t abide them. They are prissy things that the artist I was sitting for made me wear.’

‘Who was that?’ she asked.

‘Sym, up on the top of Regency Rise.’

She was impressed.

‘But he is a proper sort. They say he pays well.’

‘He’s no better than Shadrake. Dirty old lech. He wanted to paint me, then tumble me. When I denied him and told him I’d leave, he refused to give me back my clothes, so I took the ones he’d dressed me in.’

Lucrea laughed.

‘They are so uncomfortable!’ I declared.

‘And who’s he?’ she whispered, glancing in the direction of Lightburn.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ I said to her. ‘He follows me around like a dog.’

‘He’s quite a handsome one, in that mournful way,’ she said. ‘He looks a

dangerous sort. I like that look in a fellow's eye.'

'I haven't decided if I do just yet,' I said.

She smiled at me, and hugged me enthusiastically. I could smell the dirt of her, and her stale breath, and feel the very bones of her.

'It's so good to see you again, Pad!' she cried. 'Why don't you come down to my lodge for a smoke and a good chat?'

'I will,' I told her. It pained me to see her so much declined since our last meeting. She was not looking after herself at all. 'Give me a while to arrange my things, and I'll be down.'

I went back to Lightburn, drew the curtain, and sat down. I thought I might give Judika a few hours, perhaps the whole of the night. It was getting dark, and I did not fancy traversing the neighbourhood after nightfall. Besides, Lightburn had refused to tell me how far the journey to Mam Mordaunt might be.

I took up the little blue book, and began to study it while I waited, hoping to learn a little more of the mysterious society that had become the mortal enemy of the Maze Undue, and had so cruelly unfounded our lives. As I worked, I tried to relax and focus my mind using my tempering litany. The sound of Sister Bismillah's voice in my imagination, a voice I suspected I would never hear again, was very sad.

Apart from the numerals on the cover – 119 – and the Enmabic title, the book was composed in a complex cypher. I worked my way through the yellow pages of tightly handwritten brown ink, trying all the basic decrypting methods we had been taught. Substitution and transposition didn't seem to work, and neither did obvious numeric formulae. There had to be a key, and I fancied that the number 119 was part of it. But what did it denote? The one hundred and nineteenth letter? The one hundred and nineteenth word? The one hundred and nineteenth page? The one hundred and nineteenth word on the one hundred and nineteenth page?

Or was it just the one hundred and nineteenth of Lilean Chase's notebooks, painstakingly numbered where the Secretary chose not to number his?

The Curst made some grumble about the long wait, so I gave him more coins, and told him to go down to the street to fetch some food and drink for us. He did so, reluctantly.

He had been gone about half an hour when I began to feel that someone was watching me. It was a quite distressing feeling for, quite apart from the immediate alarm, it brought back the feeling I had woken to the night



before, the feeling that had roused me and got me to search the attics until I found Sister Tharpe.

There were eyes upon me. I got up off the mattress, and went to the curtain, half-expecting to see Lucrea coming to visit me, but the space around was empty. Other bedrolls and sleeping areas were screened off by lank drapes and curtains. A few lamps glowed. A breeze stirred the curtains. I could hear rain on the roof.

Behind the curtain, I should have been out of sight of everyone, unless some voyeur had bored a spy hole in the floor or the slope of the roof above me. To feel a gaze upon me suggested something more than physical eyes. We had been taught that, under certain circumstances, the inward gaze of the psyker, the outreaching vision, can feel like sunburn on the skin. I twisted my cuff to *dead*, but it did not alleviate the sensation.

I took the bent silver pin, and went out into the open. I walked the length of the lodging floor, quietly noting the people sleeping, resting or drinking in their curtained spaces. I went to the head of the stairs. There was no sign of Lightburn returning.

I went down.

On the previous night, the night the Maze Undue fell, I had wondered if I was imagining the sensation of being regarded. In hindsight, I had decided that it had been the loose end of a dream that I had woken up with, which had been intensified into an apparently genuine memory by the traumatic events that had followed.

But this was the same. It was a real feeling, not imagination, and it convinced me that the night before I'd had a real feeling too. So, the question arose, was the same fate about to befall the commune as had engulfed the Maze Undue? Or had some force, some psychic impulse, roused me then to discover Sister Tharpe's intrusion, rather than being part of that invasion?

I took a chance. There, halfway down the top stairs of the commune, I turned my cuff to *live* again, allowing myself to be more receptive – more vulnerable – to psyk.

Almost at once, I heard the laughter of a child again. The sound chilled me, just as it had in the attics of the Maze Undue. I swallowed hard. I crept down the stairs, listening carefully for another trace.

On the landing below, a broad space brightly lit by a ratty old chandelier, there was a mouldering sofa and two large porcelain pots for walking sticks.

The floorboards, banisters, walls and ceiling had been painted a dull white, and so had the old mirror screwed to the wall, gilt frame, glass and everything, so it was just the painted, white relief shape of a mirror on the wall. To one side was a pair of closed double doors. To the other, across the landing, doors led into the pigment shops. Dirty curtains hung across those doorways. The dusty, multi-coloured tracks of endless feet scuffed in and out of the doorways where pigment dust had been trodden across the white floorboards.

Below me, the ragged stairs descended to more pigment shops on the floor below.

I heard a child laugh again. I turned. I glimpsed movement. The curtain screening one of the pigment shop doorways stirred slightly.

I went that way, the pin ready. I drew the curtain aside and stepped in.

The air was close, and smelled of minerals and powders. Filthy trestle tables lined the room, stacked with pigment tins, mixing cups, jars, bottles and dishes of clear oil. The spoons, brushes, scoops and knives, all the tools of the trade, stood in pots, begrimed. The floor was a stew of trodden-in colours. No one was at work. A few lamps had been left on, and they gave off a pearlescent glow because of the powder in the air.

I crossed into the adjoining shop, which was similarly furnished, though slightly smaller. Again, I thought I heard a laugh. I sensed a movement.

A third room joined the first two, and I went through. An old man sat at one of the benches, delicately mixing a shade of red in a ceramic cup.

‘Hello?’ he asked, looking up at me.

‘Did a child,’ I began. ‘Did a child come in here?’

He looked puzzled.

‘No one has come in here at all,’ he replied.

I walked through his room, past the trays of stoppered bottles, and entered a store room where the mixing oils and suspension mediums were kept in large glass flasks on wooden shelves. From the corner of my eye, I saw a tiny figure scurry out of the door at the far end.

A child. A person no taller than my mid-thigh.

I darted after the shape. The doorway, through a curtain, led back out onto the landing. There was no one out there, but the double doors at the far side, which had been shut when I had stood there previously, were closing.

I went to them and opened them directly. I walked into a sudden burst of noise.

This chamber, a cluttered and untidy drawing room, had in it about two dozen people, all of them with musical instruments. Music had been a popular diversion in the commune, and many of the residents had liked to gather of an evening to play together while they drank or sank into stupors of lho, grinweed or gladstones.

By happenstance, the very moment I opened the door, they started playing for the first time that night, a raucous flourish of sound made by fiddles, drums, pipes, theorbos, sackbuts and other instruments. One of the pigment-stained residents even had a lirone, a sixteen-stringed cello.

The blast of noise made me jump wildly.

A cry went up, and everyone in the room stopped playing and started to laugh at the sight of me. I must have seemed very comical, to blench in such a way.

‘Look!’ someone cried. ‘It’s Padua. Padua is back!’

Several of them got up to welcome me, or to introduce me to newcomers I had not met. I did not at all want this sudden society, but I had to play my part.

As I was greeted and welcomed, I looked around the room past the faces around me. It was crowded with old furniture, and much piled with rugs and old bolsters and cushions. Everywhere there were lamps, glasses, bottles, plates of iokum and candied fruits, and shisha pipes.

There was no sign whatsoever of a small child, not even cowering behind furniture in the most shadowy corners.

# CHAPTER 19

*Which is of Shadrake's vision*

One of the musical company was Constant Shadrake, the artist. He set down his fiddle and came to me at once, beaming a smile that was supposed to be paternal but which barely concealed his venal inclinations.

'Padua! Dear Padua!' he said. His voice was husky and thick, the effect, I believed, of yellodes and lho combined. 'I am overjoyed to see you back with us in the merry household!'

He was in a good humour, though it was that part of the evening. Shadrake regularly became sour and bitter as the night wore on and intoxicants multiplied in his bloodstream.

'I want you to sit for me immediately!' he declared.

'I have only just arrived, sir,' I protested.

'That face of yours has inspired me. I have been listless for days.'

He insisted that I follow him down to his studio, though I doubted any work would actually be done. Others of the company were encouraged to follow along, and bring their wine and their instruments, so that music might accompany him while he considered a composition.

All the while, I looked around for signs of the child I had seen. The feeling of eyes upon me did not go away. I felt trapped. I wanted quiet, and the opportunity to investigate and flee, but I was instead bound up with a lecherous painter and his befuddled entourage. If I wished to preserve the mask of Padua Prate, I had to go along with it.

'Who, my dear, has been buying you such luxurious clothes?' Shadrake asked me as we descended the staircase. He fondled the lapel of my coat, as though to evaluate the quality, but it was little more than an excuse to brush

his hand against my breast.

‘Has someone been cosseting you?’ he asked.

‘I was sitting,’ I replied. ‘These are the clothes I was given.’

‘Who were you sitting for?’ he asked.

‘A nobody,’ I replied.

‘But who?’ He wanted to know. He was the fickle sort, easily affronted or offended, but his pride was equally easy to preen.

‘Some talentless man called Sym,’ I replied.

He beamed. This report pleased him immensely. He began to tell the gaggle of drinkers and musicians accompanying us how he had taught the great Sym all about shadowclouds and seascapes.

Shadrake was a tall man, and bony, with hair so dark he never shaved cleanly, even with a fresh razor. He may have been handsome as a younger man, and evidently still thought of himself that way. Hard living and erosive substances had hollowed him out. He was portly where he ought to have been slim, bony where he should have had meat, wolfish and arrogant, bleary and bloodshot. He stank of drink and lho smoke. His hands were filthy with paint. Nevertheless, he acted as though he was armed with the most unfailing charisma. He fancied himself to be an irresistibly sexual being.

His entourage of models, hue-makers, under-painters, apprentices, juniors and, I’m quite sure, bawds from the local streets, did nothing to disabuse him of that notion. They obeyed his every order, and laughed at his every joke. They did this out of fear of falling out of favour, or of falling in the way of his loutish temper if it turned. They kept him happy, so he would stay happy with them.

We went into his studio. The place was the usual mess of half-finished work, easels, stands and immense quantities of clutter. Shadrake had never been the tidiest of men; he seemed to thrive in conditions of chaos and disarray, but things had got worse. There was stuff everywhere. Items cluttered every surface and were strewn across the floor: dirty clothes, books, painting paraphernalia, cups, props, plates, garbage, bottles and even a few chamber pots in need of emptying. Half-eaten meals lay rotting on dishes. Garments and sundry items were piled up on chairs.

That was not the worst of it. Shadrake’s work had developed since I had last seen it. The images in his paintings were disquieting to say the least. It was not simply that his technique had diminished (the work was extremely

scrappy, almost childish), but the content was the stuff of lurid nightmares. Fiendish shapes coupled and writhed. Violence and dismemberment were prevalent. Anatomical grotesquery featured heavily. Some of the symbols and decorations scratched into the images were simply disturbing in themselves.

I felt most uneasy. My function here had been to study Shadrake for signs of taint, and I had reported that none had been evident. Certain glyphs and ornaments – devices that had originally flagged him as a person of interest – had proven to be rather more innocent and accidental than the sigils feared by the Secretary and Mentor Murlees.

But this was not right. This was plainly the work of a man with heretical leanings, either deliberate ones or accidental. I experienced a sense of tremendous guilt that I had not performed this function better. I had left it undone and unchecked and, after my departure, it had festered.

He was asking me what I thought of the pictures. In all honesty, they made me feel sick. I said something inconsequential. I forced myself to look more closely.

I reconsidered. There was a derangement here, but Shadrake had obviously become quite dissolute, and his outlook transformed by an excess of opiates. Though quite foul and uncomfortable, the work – like the condition of the studio itself – was perhaps the product of a hallucinating addict. Constant Shadrake had lost himself in the fevers of lho and obscura.

Someone cleared clothes off a chair, sat down, and started to play the theorbo. Someone else banged at a tambourine. Wine and amasec were slopped gleefully into glasses and handed out. Shadrake was expounding to all and sundry his latest philosophy of working, while smoking a lho-stick and vigorously loosening the paint on a palette with an oiled brush. He talked through the stick clamped between his teeth.

I wandered the room, looking at his pictures and sketches, and leafing through some of his notebooks. I was quite torn. My primary concern had to be protecting myself, and repairing the interests of the Maze Undue, so that the Ordos might be fortified and warned of their secret aggressor. But if this was the warp at work, if the Primordial Annihilator was functioning through the medium of Constant Shadrake, I felt a great compunction to take some action. A servant of the Inquisition cannot stand by when something like this is brought to their attention. It would be derelict to do so.

‘Where is my sighting glass?’ he cried, momentarily annoyed. ‘Where is

the damn thing?’

His lackeys rushed around to search for it. Shadrake had a small plate of glass, very old glass that he claimed had come from the leaded, stained-glass window of an Ecclesiarchy oratory. He had framed the thing in wood, for holding, and had it inked up with a simple grid so that he could, by eye, section and compose a subject.

Someone found it, and brought it to him, along with a glass of wine to soothe his cares. He took it, and then looked at me through it, holding it up as though it was a magnifying glass.

‘Take a seat!’ he cried. ‘Take a seat against the backdrop there and let me look at you! So beautiful! So lovely!’

He lit another lho-stick and studied me some more.

Uncomfortable under such scrutiny, I glanced up and saw Lightburn enter the studio and look on, frowning. From the look of him, I fancied some outburst was imminent. I hoped he would have the sense not to make things more difficult.

‘Who is this?’ asked one of the girls, noticing Lightburn.

‘Yes, who is this?’ asked Shadrake, turning. He viewed Lightburn speculatively through his sighting glass, and was evidently unimpressed by the composition it presented. I saw that a clash was almost inevitable. The Curst was the only other mature male in the room, the only one who was a physical match for Shadrake. Lightburn was not as tall, but he was better made. Shadrake, the king of his little commune realm, would instantly see another male as a rival, as a competitor for the attention and charms of his addled entourage.

‘Who is he?’ asked Shadrake again, with an ugly sneer, lowering his sighting glass. He stressed every word. He stood with his legs apart, in a very masculine pose that suggested he was master of all, and that his testicles were too large to permit his legs to get any closer together. It was such pantomime, I might have laughed.

Instead, I said, ‘This is Renner.’

I saw Lightburn, his face already set like an overcast sky, flinch slightly at the public use of a name he’d been reluctant to tell me.

‘And who is Renner?’ asked Shadrake. ‘He looks a proper *sort*.’

‘Renner is with me,’ I said.

‘How is he *with you*, dearest Pad?’ asked Shadrake suspiciously.

I got up and walked towards Lightburn. The actual psychology required to

coax Shadrake out of his confrontational stance was very simple, for the nature of the upset was ludicrously basic. I just hoped that Shadrake's mind was not already too befuddled for it to work.

'Renner sat with me for Sym,' I said. 'He did not like Sym much either, so I told him I'd put a word in here.'

'He is not very... aesthetically pleasing,' said Shadrake.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'but he is Curst.'

Shadrake frowned.

'What difference does that make?' he asked.

I turned to him and smiled, as if it was obvious.

'I thought I explained that,' I said. 'Sym is quite beside himself over your rivalry.'

'He is?' asked Shadrake, trying not to sound surprised.

'Your reputation begins to surpass his in the city,' I explained. 'His work is very accomplished, but it is considered far too safe. He does not get to grips with reality the way you do.'

'Is that... what they say?' asked Shadrake.

'Oh yes,' I said. 'They say Shadrake has an eye for the street, sir. The underbelly of the city. They talk of the raw honesty of your work, that you will paint less becoming images and thus achieve a greater artistic truth. Only you would think to use beggars and harlots and street runners.'

'This is true,' he said. 'There is much more honesty in my work. I bare my soul.' He was flattered, as I knew he would be. In truth, he used harlots and beggars as models because they would work for a glass of amasec and a crust of bread.

'Sym has heard it all,' I went on. 'He is quite threatened by it. He decided he would paint such subjects as lepers and penitents... the pariahs of the street, and thus revive his reputation. He intends to paint the low residents of the gutter, sir, those who usually are invisible. So he chose a Curst man. This burdener here.'

Shadrake regarded the Curst afresh.

'That man Sym mocks me,' he said. 'He would steal my truth.'

The half-drunken entourage around us, who had been listening to the exchange, hissed and booed.

Shadrake fished the lho-stick out of his mouth and exhaled a cloud of smoke.

'Will you do me the honour, Curst one?' he asked Lightburn. 'Will you sit



for me? I'll show that Sym how it's done.'

Lightburn looked at me. He was mystified.

'Show him your ink,' I said.

'What?' Lightburn asked.

'Show him your ink. Master Shadrake will like the marks of it.' With my eyes, I tried to implore the Curst to play along.

I expected him to roll up a sleeve or turn back a cuff. Apparently understanding the play we were acting, Lightburn set down the bag he had been carrying on the floor, then unceremoniously took off his coat and his shirt.

His arms and upper body were lean and heavily muscled. His skin was a sunless white. The tattoos covered him from the waist to the throat, front and back, and down each arm to the wrist. There were thousands of close-writ lines, each one a burden or a penance, a task or a duty. They were the things he would do or perform to alleviate others and to purge himself. They seemed to go on below the line of his waistband.

A Curst usually has three or four inks upon his skin, sometimes a dozen, depending on the weight of his burden. I had never seen a man with so many.

It made me wonder what he had done to need so very much atonement.

Shadrake was impressed.

'Will you take a glass of wine, sir, or a smoke?' he asked Lightburn.

'I do not partake of neither,' said Lightburn.

'Will you sit here then?' Shadrake asked, ushering Lightburn towards the chair I had occupied in front of the dropcloth.

Lightburn wandered to the chair and sat down. Shadrake snapped orders to his hangers-on, sending them off for charcoal, paper, a clean board, a particular easel and more amasec. All the while, he considered Lightburn through his sighting glass.

I wandered up to the Curst.

'Just sit here quietly for a while,' I whispered. 'Keep him occupied. In half an hour, he'll be too drunk to draw. He's already smoked too much tonight.'

'This is a pretence?' he asked.

'Just play along. I appreciate your effort.'

I stepped back, and then looked down at him. The ink on his skin was so packed in, the letters so small, they were hard to read. One would have to be intimately close to him to comprehend them.

‘What did you do, Renner?’ I asked.  
He did not reply.

I stayed on-hand, watching, but gradually moved back so I was no longer the centre of attention. Some music started up again. Shadrake actually began to draw.

I could still feel the eyes on me. The sense of a psyker’s regard had not left me, throughout the encounter. I wondered who or what was in the commune with us, or who might be gazing down upon it from some otherness with his mind’s eye. The God-Emperor is said to watch us all from His high vantage of the Golden Throne of Terra, but I did not think this was Him.

This was a closer scrutiny.

After an hour, a cry went up for more wine, and I volunteered to help fetch some, thinking it would give me the opportunity to leave the room and see if there had been any sign of Judika. Lightburn glared at the painter, trapped in his chair. I nodded to him, a signal to be still and bear it. Then I went out and ascended the stairs to the residence level.

There was no one around. Everyone was up for the night, and downstairs getting drunk or altered.

On my second circuit of the curtain-screened encampment under the roof, I heard a child laugh.

I followed the sound, pushing through curtains, drawing them aside, stepping over and through the mattress plots and possessions of the commune dwellers instead of going around. I glimpsed a tiny figure scurrying down the stairs, just a silhouette backlit by the chandelier below. It looked like an imp or one of the other little people, or like one of the squat-kind in the old legends.

I ran. I heard laughter again.

Hitching up my skirt with one hand, cursing Laurael Raeside for her manner of dress, I ran down the stairs. The curtain in the doorway of the pigment shop was swaying as if someone had drawn it aside and let it drop.

I flipped out the silver pin.

‘Who is there?’ I called out. ‘Show yourself. If you are just a child, then I will not harm you.’

From below came the sound of laughter and crude music, the sound of clapping.

I pulled back the curtain and went into the pigment shop. It was just as I

had seen it earlier.

‘Hello?’ I called.

On one of the tables, the glass bottles and flasks were trembling slightly, as if someone had just walked past and rocked an old floorboard under them.

‘Show yourself!’ I called. My fingers curled around the bent pin.

No one answered. More laughter and music floated up through the floor. I heard a drum.

I bent down, and looked under the tables, but the spaces below them were filled with drums and crates, and it was impossible to see through.

I heard laughter again. A child’s stifled glee.

I stood up smartly.

‘Where are you?’ I asked. I edged around the end of one bench until I could see clear down to the door into the second mixing room.

‘Where are you?’ I repeated.

Another laugh.

I took a step. I heard a wooden clack and turned.

A tiny figure appeared, stepping out from behind a bench to face me. Its eyes were very wide and very bright, innocent and amazed, unblinking. It smiled. It was only a little taller than my knee.

But it was not a child.

And it was not alone. A second figure, almost identical, appeared at the other end of the bench. They moved towards me from opposite directions, smiling.

They were the voice-thrower’s puppets from the window of Blackwards emporium: the boy and the girl. Their eyes fixed me with blank, glassy intent. Their cheeks were rosy. Their mouths clacked open and shut as though they were trying to speak.

They both had tiny toy knives in their hands.

They were just objects; I knew this full well. They were wooden things, literally puppets for a telekine mind. I twisted my cuff to *dead* so that I could cut their strings and break the control.

They did not drop to the floor. They rushed me.

# CHAPTER 20

## *A consideration of playthings*

The boy doll reached me first. With the tottering steps of a toddler, he dashed across the floor and attacked my legs, slashing his toy knife to and fro. His mouth clacked. *Its* mouth, I should say, for it was just a toy. But despite the obvious artifice of its over-sized head, the wooden construction, the white paint, the rosy cheeks, the black lacquer hair and the slots beside the mouth, I could not help feeling it was a *he*.

There was even a little wooden tongue, painted red, that jiggled on a hinge when his mouth clacked open. The glass eyes swivelled in their sockets to look up at me.

I believe I exclaimed in disgust as it attacked. It was a vile and unnatural thing, the product of a child's fever-dream. I simply kicked out, and the toe of my shoe caught the doll in the chest and sent him flying back across the pigment shop. He tumbled as he landed, clattering head over heels, and ended up lying on his shoulders, with his body and small legs draped back over his face. I saw the little gentleman's shoes on his feet, perfect little leather shoes with tiny laces.

He jerked, rolled over awkwardly, and then stood up. He had to use his hands to raise himself onto his feet. It was like a child learning to stand.

I didn't have time to observe the full, uncanny horror of the performance. The girl doll was at me too. It had moved more slowly than the boy, because it had been obliged to lift up the train of its court gown with one hand to free its legs. I could sympathise with that. I dodged back as the tiny lady's knife stabbed at me. Again, I believe, I made an involuntary cry of disgust. They were so small, it was like fighting against animals. And the

details were so alarming: the unblinking eyes, the carved grin. On the lady, it was the bun of real hair on top of her painted head. She had tiny earrings.

I backed away, moving around the corner of the bench. The combat, such as it was, was shaking the floorboards, and all the jars and pits and glasses on the mixing benches were rattling and clinking together.

Striking with my hands was impractical. The girl doll was too low a target for my silver pin. Apart from anything else, what could a silver pin do against a wooden breast?

I knew I would extend too far and probably over-balance if I tried to stab at her. The focus of her attack was my shins and knees. I kept skipping and dodging back. She landed one stab, but it was brushed aside by the folds of my skirt.

I needed a better weapon. I stumbled backwards, and banged into the nearest bench. The impact knocked a couple of bottles over, and one rolled off the side and smashed on the floor, filling the air with a cloud of blue dust. Not daring to look away from the jabbing, striking girl doll at my feet, I groped around frantically for something on the bench beside me. My hand turned over bottles, smashed jars, and sent cups of brushes and mixing sticks spilling over. I finally seized upon a small glass flask, and threw it at the girl doll.

The flask glanced off her head with a wooden crack and made her totter back a few steps. The impact rotated her head slightly, and she had to straighten it again to look at me. The glass eyes swivelled sideways in their sockets, first, coming around to look at me. Then they remained fixed on me as the head rotated back to face me.

I grabbed another pot and threw it. The doll ducked, and it went over its head. The first flask had not broken. It had simply landed and rolled across the floor. The second, flung with more force, smashed against the legs of the bench opposite and released a floury cloud of yellow pigment.

I grabbed a third bottle, and threw it, and then a fourth, then a fifth, snatching them up and slinging them at the girl doll to keep it at bay. The pots and flasks sailed past her, to one side, or the other. She tilted her body to avoid them. Each one exploded as it landed, a little grenade of dried colour that stained the floor and filled the air with a vivid smoke. The third bottle clipped her shoulder. The fourth struck her full in the chest, and knocked her down into a sitting position. This gave me a chance for another kick, and I took it, propelling the doll clear across the room with

considerable force. She bounced off a bench further away, smashing bottles and breaking ceramic pots, and cartwheeled off the side out of sight.

The boy was already back, toddling towards me. I threw a tincture pot at him too. The glass vial, full of bright red pigment, hit him in the face and smashed, covering his head and shoulders with red mineral dust. He shook his head – a horribly human mannerism – to rid himself of the dust, but it had fully stained his face and ruined the collar and shoulders of his velvet suit. Wooden eyelids clicked, blinking dust away. The glass eyes looked at me as manically as before, staring out of a crimson face.

I backed up, and saw a mahl stick lying on the bench between the mixing trays. It was nearly a metre long, and the cushioned pad at one end allowed an artist to lean it against a painting, to use as a steadying rest, without harming the canvas.

The boy doll rushed at me again, brandishing his toy knife. I jabbed at him with the stick, shoving him back with pokes of the cushioned end. Each time, he stumbled back at me, hacking at the stick with his knife, so the third time I rammed him hard and knocked him on his back.

I felt a sharp pain in my left tricep, and turned to find the girl doll standing on the workbench beside me. She had stabbed me with her toy knife. I cried out and jerked away from her, and she followed me along the bench, toddling rapidly step by step, kicking bottles and pots out of her path. The damage I had done to her by kicking her across the room was mainly scuffs and scrapes, but it had also knocked off her bun of human hair, leaving nothing but a brass fixing in the back of her painted head.

She seemed angry.

She had made a mistake attacking me at a higher level. I slammed down the silver pin and staked the trailing train of her gown to the bench as firmly as though I'd nailed it there. Arrested, she strained at her dress, then turned to try to yank the pin out.

The red-faced boy doll grabbed at my legs, and became tangled in my skirts. I knocked at him, but felt another sharp puncture in the meat of my left calf. With both hands, driven by rage, I swung the mahl stick like a bat and sent him flying the length of the room.

The girl doll tore off the last few centimetres of her train, which she left nailed to the bench by the silver pin, and launched herself at me. She leapt clean off the bench, arms raised high.

I met her with a round-house punch that connected in mid-air and smashed

her off to my left. She landed on another bench, shattering a number of bottles.

With them both driven off, I had an opportunity to flee. Some odd sentiment made me pause long enough to recover the silver pin, but as I reached for it, I realised that my left arm was numb.

A moment later, my left leg went cold, and stopped supporting me. I fell badly, unable to move my left arm to break my collapse, and cracked my shoulder and jaw against the edge of the bench.

I lay on the floor, my right arm and leg churning, trying to get the other half of my body to work. A palsy had set in from my scalp to my toes on the left side. I had gone blind in my left eye and my mouth on that side was slack.

The toy blades had been envenomed. This was death.

Or something very much worse.

Blackness seeped in. I went fully blind. Then the world ceased to exist.

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# CHAPTER 21

## *Leverage*

I woke up slowly, as though I was thawing out of ancient ice after a million years.

My body hurt all over, especially my left arm and left calf. My head throbbed.

I remained lying down. I was on a settee in the corner of a large room with a high ceiling. A blanket had been draped over me. I was still wearing Laurael Raeside's garments, though they were now very dishevelled, and marked with many splashes of pigment dust.

This was not the commune. I had been taken to another building. The floor was metal, covered with a large tapestry rug. The walls were stone. The ceiling was whitewashed plaster. The room had large windows on two sides, through which a pale daylight streamed, though they were shrouded by white muslin drapes so I could not see out from where I lay.

I waited and listened for a while. I could hear the sounds of a city outside, and was fairly sure it was Queen Mab. I was quite high up, because the background street noise came from below, and I heard various bells chiming at intervals. One noteworthy peal came from my left. It was low and slow, and I knew it was the clock tower on Saint Baal under Toilgate, which had a distinctive dull note and always struck the hour late.

So it was just after dawn, and I was in a high building in the south of the city, east of Toilgate, which meant I was probably east of the Faeronicus commercia and the riverside junkmoots. Several buildings fitted the bill in that district, including the Universitariate of Chasopar Toilgate, the Orphaeonic School of Music, the Tarmos Rubricatory, the Honourable



Frater Guildhall, and the Ecclesiarchy basilica and mission, none of which seemed likely venues.

Tentatively, I turned my head to review the rest of the room.

I was not alone. Two high-backed armchairs had been placed side by side in the opposite corner. The dolls sat in them, watching me. They were sitting as small children sit in adult chairs, with their feet up on the seats.

The girl doll sat in the left one, silent. Her gown was torn. She had her hands in her lap. She was holding her bun of human hair. Her glass eyes had tipped down to stare at it, as if in loss. Every now and then, she rolled her eyes up to stare at me, and then back down at her treasured hairpiece.

The boy doll was still stained bright red in the face. He was staring at me too, bright glass eyes in a red visage. His wooden mouth was clacking open and shut. As I watched, he wriggled to the edge of the seat, lowered himself onto the floor, waddled across to a low wooden dresser that stood against the wall by the door, and helped himself to nuts from the earthenware bowl that stood on top. He filled the pockets of his velvet coat with them. Then he toddled back to the chair, clambered up into it, sat back, and took out the nuts, one by one. Staring at me, he cracked each shell with a clasp of his little wooden fist, and then tossed the broken kernels into his mouth. His mouth went *clack-clack-clack* on its wooden slots.

They were both quite chilling. It was the intensity of their stares, the fixedness of their grins, the blankness of their expressions. They were bright-eyed and smiling, but that was not the feeling their faces conveyed.

The room was plain and ascetic, and the furniture, though good, was very puritan. I decided, though it seemed unlikely, that of the places I could think of, this seemed most to resemble the Ecclesiarchy mission.

The door opened. I feigned sleep. Under my eyelids, I saw Lupan enter. He looked harried and pale. He was carrying a large buckled bag of black leather. He set it down on the floor, opened it, and drew out a small metal case in which lay a syringe and several glass vials. He began to prepare the syringe, presumably with a shot of some stimulant designed to wake me.

‘You won’t need that,’ I said, sitting up.

He jumped, and then stared at me for a moment before putting the syringe away again.

‘You’ve caused a deal of trouble,’ he said. His tone was sour.

‘Really? I don’t recall you being the one who was attacked in the damned emporium. When my employer finds out—’

Lupan gave me a pained expression that said he was tired of playing.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Let’s not pretend. Why don’t you tell me your real name and we can begin this process.’

‘What process?’ I asked.

‘Your life is over, girl,’ he said. ‘How well you get to spend your afterlife is up to you.’

‘Well, sitting here listening to your riddles isn’t something I’d choose,’ I said. ‘If you know so much, Master Lupan, you know I have friends, and you know how terrible their punishment will be when they catch up with you.’

I paused.

‘And you know they *will* catch up with you,’ I added.

He did indeed look sick with fear for a moment. He wiped his hand across his mouth, and checked over his shoulder to see that no one was listening. I felt that included more than just anybody who might be about to follow him into the room. I felt that it included the dolls.

He crouched down facing me. He looked earnest and scared.

‘Help me, for Throne’s sake,’ he hissed, ‘and I will help you... however I can.’

I kept my eyes locked on his to increase his discomfort.

‘How could I possibly help you, sir?’ I asked.

He was agitated.

‘I am in trouble with the owners,’ he confessed quickly, glancing over his shoulder again. ‘With the family. They say I bungled the handling of you, which perhaps I did. They blame me for what occurred. I say they should have given the job to someone more senior, but they didn’t want to give away the fact that they knew what you were.’

*What* I was. I noticed his choice of words.

‘Now I am in the dog-house and might be demoted,’ he continued. ‘Or worse. The Young Master is very angry with the way things turned out.’

‘Who is the Young Master?’ I asked.

‘Throne, Balthus Blackwards,’ Lupan replied. ‘This arrangement is very valuable to him. Valuable to the family. He is blaming me for jeopardising it.’

‘Arrangement?’ I asked.

He looked at me with contempt.

‘Have you any idea,’ he asked, ‘how long Blackwards has wanted to deal

with a piece of merchandise like you or one of your kind?’

I did not ask him what that meant. I presumed he meant a carrier of the pariah gene. Instead, I shook my head.

‘A long time, let me tell you, a long time.’ He frowned. ‘But they would never dare cross the Eight, or get upon bad terms with the King, or in any way interfere with the programme. But now the programme is gone... in disarray... They feel they are able to move in and salvage the scattered assets.’

‘To asset-strip?’ I asked.

He looked stung.

‘No, no. To collect up and safeguard lost assets, and perhaps find new and productive homes for them.’

‘For significant financial reward,’ I added for him.

He scowled.

‘Am I an asset, Master Lupan? Am I merchandise? So far you have not described me in any terms that I like the sound of. So far, in fact, I have been threatened, attacked, drugged and kidnapped. You sent those things after me, whatever they are.’

I looked across at the dolls.

‘We had little time to be subtle. There was an opportunity—’

‘I don’t care, Master Lupan,’ I said. ‘All I know is I have no idea why I should help you.’

Again, he cast a wary glance over his shoulder.

‘They’ll be coming soon,’ he whispered to me. ‘I am supposed to prepare you. I am in disgrace. I fear for my job and my life. If you can give me anything, any damn thing at all that I can use to show the Young Master I am still of value, then I will help you in return.’

‘How will you help me?’ I asked.

He was becoming desperate.

‘However I can. It can’t be in a big way, but in whatever small ways I can. As often as I can. But you have to give me something.’

The man was in fear of his life. I could tell that from his micro-expressions and involuntary body language, and from the terror pheromones sweating out of him. One may act afraid with some conviction, well enough to convince a casual observer, but that level of physical apprehension cannot be faked. Well, it can, but only by the most high-grade operative or assassin.

I was confident that Lupan’s fear was real. I could alleviate it. That gave

me a small measure of leverage to exploit. That made him, in the language of Blackwards, *my asset*. But I knew I had to give him something real, something of value. If I bluffed him with something artificial, he might see through it at once and my chance would be gone. Even if I fooled him for a while, he might find out later, and the repercussions for me might be worse. I had no way of knowing the level and thoroughness of the Blackwards' intelligence on me, or the Maze Undue. There was every chance that they could see through any lie I told. So, to be sure, I could not tell a lie.

'Prove to me you can help me,' I said. 'Tell me where I am.'

His hands were shaking. I could hear footsteps approaching along the hallway outside.

'The mission house,' he hissed. 'The mission house of the Ecclesiarchy on Phoenician Square.'

'How long have I been unconscious?'

'Since last night,' he said. 'Eight hours!'

'How many floors up are we?'

'For Throne's sake!' he squeaked. 'Six!'

'Who is about to enter the room, Master Lupan?'

His agitation was now extreme.

'The Young Master. The Young Master and some private agents! Bodyguards.'

'What is he coming here to do?'

'Sell you. Sell you, of course!'

'To who, Master Lupan?'

He clamped his hands to his head in frustration and panic.

'To his holiness the Pontifex Urba of Queen Mab!' he squealed. 'Now please! Please, give me something in return!'

I looked into his eyes.

'My name is Alizebeth Bequin,' I said.

# CHAPTER 22

## *A purchase on behalf of the Pontifex*

The door opened, and Balthus Blackwards entered the room. Lupan got up and stood back, his head bowed and his hands clasped in front of him. The dolls, I noticed, also slithered forward off their seats, dropped to the carpet and stood to respectful attention.

I did not rise.

Blackwards was dressed in a dark green suit with a shirt of pale violet. The shirt had a small ruff, and its lace cuffs extended beyond the sleeves of his jacket. An intricate silver brooch was pinned to his left lapel. His face was set hard. As on our previous meeting, he looked down his nose at me. I had drugged him unconscious then, though I had not directly intended to. I sensed that he was angry about that, and wished he could exact some penalty for daring to affront his person so.

My value stayed his hand.

He entered the room flanked by four agents. They were bodyguards, trained in personal protection. Three were male, and one was female. They wore similar black coats of ballistic cloth over dark blue bodygloves reinforced with silver link mail. They were understated, but I could tell they were of the highest professional standard. They walked like dancers, ready at a microsecond's notice to react or move. Their faces were expressionless. Each one had a tracery of silver wire inlaid in his or her skin from the right temple, down the side of the face and down the throat, a jagged marking like the depiction of a lightning strike. This was the sign of a neural embed, an augmentation to accelerate their reflex reaction times. I could see no obvious weapons on them, but the coats allowed for the concealment of

sidearms or even short swords. In a church precinct, I presumed it would be blades.

More than their bearing and their deportment, and the signs of their expensive augmentation, I knew they were of the very finest quality because that's what Balthus Blackwards would employ.

'Is she ready?' he asked Lupan.

Lupan nodded.

'Why don't you ask her?' I suggested. 'She can hear you quite clearly.'

'Tell her that the last time I spoke directly to her, it cost me pain and discomfort, several expensive servitors, and other sundry damage to stock and fittings,' Blackwards said to Lupan.

Lupan opened his mouth and turned to me.

'I heard him,' I said. I looked back at Blackwards.

'Why don't you bill me?' I asked.

He looked down his nose at me. His lip crinkled.

'I will offset my expenses and inconvenience against the price that you are about to fetch. It will be adequate.'

He smiled. It was the most disagreeable smile I think I have ever seen.

Time to manoeuvre.

'I fear that the Eight will not thank you for disbursing their property so freely,' I remarked, not in the slightest knowing what the Eight might be.

Blackwards stiffened. The name evidently carried weight.

'It does not concern me,' he replied, off-handedly.

'Does it not?' I asked. I rose to my feet and tossed the blanket aside. 'Do you know what I think?'

'I am not interested—'

'I think the King will want you dead, Balthus Blackwards,' I said. 'I think the King will want you punished most cruelly for interfering with the programme. You, and all those who stand with you.'

I said this for the benefit of the bodyguards, though none of them reacted.

'The programme is gone!' Blackwards spat. 'It is ruined and burned! I am merely showing initiative and enterprise, salvaging what may be salvaged. The King will understand that.'

'We will see,' I said. 'We will see if the emporium is still trading in another year or more. I suggest you let me leave, Balthus. Let me leave now. I will go to the King and beseech him for mercy on your behalf. I will tell him you helped me. I will not mention that you tried to *sell* me.'

Blackwards made a face that suggested he had tasted something sour. He looked at Lupan.

‘I thought you said you could convince her to be cooperative?’ he said. ‘They will be ready in an hour to view her and she is still filthy and unkempt. If she speaks to his holiness in this way—’

‘She will not,’ Lupan insisted. ‘She certainly will not.’

He glanced at me quickly.

‘Will you?’ he asked. ‘If they think you are troublesome, or that you are not what we say you are, then things will go even worse for you!’

*And for Blackwards*, I wanted to answer, but I needed to maintain what little in the way of an ally I had established in Lupan. So I said nothing and remained sullen.

‘I will have her ready, sir,’ Lupan told the Young Master. ‘She is beginning to cooperate. I believe she is simply apprehensive of you, but who wouldn’t be?’

Lupan let out a little nervous laugh, which Blackwards did not join in with.

‘I think I have a measure of understanding with her,’ Lupan added. ‘I have, for instance, learned her name.’

Blackwards raised one eyebrow.

‘Her name?’

‘Her true name, sir.’

‘She has thousands, one for every function that programme sent her out on. She’s lying.’

‘I don’t believe so, sir. The name was Bequin. Alizebeth Bequin.’

Blackwards thought about this. Then he took a deep breath and walked towards the door.

‘I want her ready downstairs in forty-five minutes, Lupan,’ he ordered. ‘No excuses.’

Blackwards left the room, his bodyguards escorting him like moons around a parent planet. Lupan looked at me.

‘You must be careful of him,’ he said.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘For my sake!’ he cried.

He bent down, opened his black bag, and took out a clean grey bodyglove, a plain black tunic dress, and a brown wool robe with a hood, such as a monastic might wear. All were neatly folded.

‘Clothes for you. I’ll bring water so you can wash.’

‘I’m not getting washed or changed with you in the room,’ I said.

‘I will wait outside,’ he assured me.

‘Nor will I stand those things being in here,’ I added, pointing at the dolls, who had climbed back into their seats the moment Blackwards made his exit.

‘Very well,’ said Lupan.

He left and came back shortly afterwards with a washing basin, a cloth and a jug of warm water. He set them on a side table. From the bag, he also produced a comb, a nail brush and file, a water bottle, and some bread and cheese wrapped in waxed paper.

‘I thought you might be hungry,’ he said. I was, though I hadn’t dared to admit it to myself.

‘Make yourself presentable,’ he said. ‘Quickly, please.’ He went to the door, and nodded to the dolls.

With what seemed to me to be reluctance, they slid off their chairs again, and tottered out of the room. The girl doll, still holding her bun of human hair, swivelled her eyes to look at me as she went past.

As he pulled the door shut, Lupan looked at me and said, ‘Quickly now.’

As soon as the door closed, I started to eat, and to sip water from the bottle. It occurred to me that the food and drink might be laced with further drugs, but I took a calculated risk. Hunger and thirst were beginning to impair my mental performance, and my physical energy was at a very low ebb after the chemically-induced sleep.

As I ate, bread in one hand and bottle in the other, I paced the room, looking under and inside what little furniture was there. I put the food and drink down, and checked the windows. Lupan had not lied. I was six floors up in the great mission house. Below me, far below, lay a rain-swept Phoenician Square. Worshippers were gathering for the midday services in the mighty Basilica Saint Orphaeus, which the mission house adjoined and served. Other worshippers, pilgrims from far away and off-world, were queuing up at the booths along the side of the square to buy votive candles and file past the shrines, or visit the famous frescoes where the magnitude and glory of the God-Emperor could be briefly experienced.

The windows were all locked. Peering out, I felt sure I was capable of climbing down the face of the mission house, but it was not an option. To get out, I’d have to break a window, and that would bring people running. I



would not get down the face of the building in broad daylight without being detained.

I sighed, and ate more of the bread and cheese.

I considered why the Ecclesiarchy had involved themselves in my business. If my value was simply as a blank, then the Church should have no real difficulty acquiring one through other means. Pariahs are rare, but not impossible to find. The ecclesiarchs had no reason to steal one from the Ordos.

It was possible that neither Blackwards nor the Church knew who they were dealing with. By its very nature, the purpose and business of the Maze Undue was a secret. It was conceivable that neither party realised that the Holy Inquisition was involved. Perhaps they believed the Maze Undue was part of a darker, less legal, less wholesome operation.

But there were too many mysteries. If Blackwards and the Church suspected that the Maze Undue was part of an illegal operation, why were they involving themselves in it? Was there corruption with the Ecclesiarchy in Queen Mab? It wasn't unheard of in the history of the Imperium, but it was a serious matter. If they found out they were revealing their leanings to an agent of the Inquisition...

Other things bothered me greatly. The words and terms they had used, such as *the King*, *the programme*, *'the Eight'*. Lupan had indiscreetly acknowledged that Blackwards knew of the Cognitae, and that said society was involved in the downfall of the Maze Undue.

My best guess was that I had been swept up in the fall-out of some significant Ordo operation that the Maze Undue had been part of, and which the Secretary and Mam Mordaunt had not made an account of to any of us. With them gone, there was no ready source of data to fill in the details, but it seemed likely that the Maze Undue had been involved in some disguised form, so that others perceived the Maze Undue to be something that it was not. It seemed to me that the Secretary had been employing some strategy wherein the Maze Undue and its candidates were performing the roles of a clandestine secret society, perhaps even a heretical one, in order to draw out and destroy a real one.

If I was lucky, and I was brought into the presence of the Pontifex Urba, I hoped I might make a judgement of him and, if I felt him true, make representations to him by which the Inquisition could be contacted directly and an ending made of the whole sorry matter.

*If* he was true.

Of course, I would have been a fool not to consider other possible interpretations of recent events, no matter how unpalatable they might be, and I was no fool.

But some of those notions were so dark they distressed me, because in order for them to be the authentic version of things, I would have to *re-understand* almost everything I had been brought up to know.

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# CHAPTER 23

## *The Basilica Saint Orphaeus*

Lupan took me down.

I had washed, and dressed in the clothes he had given me. The bodyglove was a reasonable fit, and the dress was adequate. The robes made me feel like a monk or novitiate, and Lupan insisted I wore the hood up. The brown wool was coarse and rough. It was good at least to be out of the confining and now quite dirty garments of Laurael Raeside. I felt I had put her aside too.

He took me from the room along a considerable hallway with a painted ceiling, golden chandeliers and a stone-dressed floor. The hallway had doors on either side, all of them closed. There was no one else around, and the cool air smelled faintly of incense. In the distance, I could hear the bells chiming in the high towers, calling the faithful to worship.

I had considered overpowering Lupan when he came back to collect me, but he brought one of the bodyguards with him, one of the men. I did not want to undertake that kind of fight.

At the end of the hallway, a great circular staircase brought us down two floors to a vestibule where Balthus Blackwards was waiting. With him were the other three bodyguards, and two robed confessors of the Adeptus Ministorum.

One of these, whose name I learned was Hodi, looked me up and down, and lowered my hood to consider me.

‘This is what your King has produced?’ he asked, doubtfully. He was an unattractive, grizzled man with a blotchy face and poor teeth. His robes were pristine white, and decorated with gold thread and stoles of scarlet

satin.

‘Not *my* King, father,’ replied Blackwards.

Hodi shot a glance at him then went back to his consideration of me.

‘She is more than she looks,’ Blackwards continued. ‘The programme has been refined over a long period. They know what they are doing. This is a very rare opportunity for—’

Hodi looked at Blackwards again.

‘Always selling, my son. You are always selling. Rid yourself of the habit here. This is a house of the divine. Money has no function here. We are about the most illustrious work now. We will find a destiny for this child that the King, for all his vaunted intellect, could not have begun to imagine.’

He paused.

‘Don’t look so stricken, Blackwards. You will be amply rewarded, as per our agreement. It simply pains me to deal with souls like you who do not see the reward in this endeavour for its own sake, beyond mortal desserts.’

Blackwards nodded. It was clearly hard for him to appear humble.

‘Will you be able to procure others for us?’ the other confessor asked.

‘I believe so,’ said Blackwards. ‘We are making investigations.’

‘Maybe she knows where another can be found?’ the other confessor asked, looking at me.

‘I do not,’ I said squarely.

Blackwards looked dark. The confessors glanced at one another and smiled.

‘Is she cuffed?’ Hodi asked. ‘Controlled?’

‘She has a limiter cuff,’ said Blackwards.

Hodi reached out, took my wrist and raised it to expose the cuff. It was set to *live*. He examined it and then let go of my wrist.

‘Do not reset this,’ he told me directly. ‘Your blankness will not be appreciated by those gathered today in the brass room. Do you understand me?’

I nodded.

Hodi looked at his fellow confessor.

‘I will escort her,’ he said. ‘You may bring the others after us.’

He turned to lead me away.

‘I will keep her in my sight until our business is concluded!’ Blackwards exclaimed, stepping forwards.

Hodi turned and gave him a dismissive look.

‘Do you accuse the Church of attempting to swindle you?’ he asked. ‘You think we would trick you?’

‘She remains my merchandise until the deal is done,’ said Blackwards.

‘She is not merchandise, Balthus,’ said Hodi. ‘She is the possibility of salvation from that which persecutes us all. Be advised, my son, we have tolerated your involvement because you are in a position to assist us, but you are lucky to have been allowed to come this far.’

Blackwards looked suitably quelled. I felt sure I saw a tiny flicker of satisfaction on Lupan’s face.

Confessor Hodi took me by the arm and walked me towards a massive set of golden doors, which were richly encrusted with bas-relief carvings showing the glory and magnitude of the God-Emperor. Seeing him approach, attendants opened the doors for us. The attendants were wardens of the precinct staff, docents and junior clerics who tended the shrine and guarded it from thieves. They wore pale grey robes and masks painted with the likenesses of saints.

The doors opened onto a great marble chamber, and let sound and bustle and light out at us. The chamber was actually an enclosed bridge that linked the mission house to the mighty basilica. Flights of steps ran up from the street level several floors below to allow public access, and the piers crossing was lined with tall columns, each one fashioned into the likeness of a saint or virtue. Daylight flooded in from both sides through the high spaces. There was a great, but distant, hiss of voices. We crossed the space, threading through the groups of worshippers and pilgrims.

I felt apprehension. The Basilica Saint Orphaeus was one of the largest and most important structures in Queen Mab, the focus of the Imperial Faith in this corner of the world, and a noted shrine. I had not been there for many years, and I had forgotten its majesty. We were crossing to what was just one of its many portals. The view from the bridge showed me other bridges on either side of us crossing to other portals. The vast bulk of the basilica rose above us like a cliff, and we came into its shadow.

Inside, there was a greater sense of space, and darkness, and hush. The voices of the pilgrims around us dropped respectfully. My mind reeled at the thickness of the walls we passed through, the height of the ceiling. There was a sepulchral gloom, pierced by the tiny lights of hanging candelabras. The space took our voices, and gave them back as meek

echoes.

This was but a chamber of admittance, where pilgrims could wash their hands and feet in stone basins of cool water, and prepare their minds for contemplation. Hodi did not pause here, but drew me on. We approached the doorway facing the bridge entrance, which was the yawning mouth of a vast, bas-relief face that made up the wall. The sightless eyes gazed upwards in supplication. The face looked a little like it was howling, but a little more like it was open-mouthed in metaphysical rapture. The wall and the face were of beaten copper and, in the fustian gloom, I did not see what their form was until we were close to them and only then I realised I was about to be devoured.

Inside the doorway mouth, we reached a bank of moving staircases, four of them, side by side, each set wide enough to take three persons standing abreast on a step. We took the left-hand one. The intricate and ancient treads were made of gold and brass, and the moving handrails were sleeved in segmented ivory. The apprehensive hands of the faithful had polished the bone to a dull gleam.

We stepped onto the staircase, and then let it carry us. We stood side by side as it solemnly bore us down into the massive interior of the basilica.

Have you been there? To Saint Orphaeus? I know many have. Thousands of pilgrims visit, every year. I know there are great buildings in other cities and on other worlds, but it is the first great Imperial building I ever saw, and it has stayed in my mind as such. The scale is numbing. In the main part of the structure, under the dome, there is an expanse of floor like a city plaza, on which the crowds of pilgrims and worshippers gather like patterns of lichen. Half of that area is given over to rows of pews, thousands of rows, where the faithful may sit and pray and observe the high altar. The dome is so vast and so high that a microclimate weather pattern of clouds forms under the apex.

On all sides of the main part, pillared doorways admit crowds from the street, and banks of moving staircases like the one we were standing on carry them down from the adjoining buildings. Each bank of staircases emerges from another open mouth like the orifice through which we had entered, but these mouths belong to faces that are larger, and bright with gold leaf, and have huge sun-ray headdresses. The basilica walls are composed of such giant faces: the awestruck, ethereal humans out of whose mouths the staircases flow, and, alternating between them, the sublime

visages of stylised visors, the aspects of the Adeptus Astartes.

Noise is the vast hush of a filled emptiness, an open space where voices are diminished by the distance. Thousands of people are speaking down below, and choirs are singing, and pilgrims are praying, but the noise is reduced to a background static by the immensity, and held inside a veil of echo. There is a foggy, celestial light, like golden lamps burning on a vaporous day.

The domed main space encircles the altar end, which is a gigantic canyon of steep organ pipes and choir stalls leading down in a dramatic defile to the high platform and the thrones of the exalted. It is looking down a sheer and impenetrable ravine towards the rising sun, a dark gorge of pipes and sharp pillared cliffs facing the monumental light of day.

‘I am told your name is Alizebeth,’ the confessor said as we descended.

‘Yes, sir,’ I replied.

‘I urge you to cooperate, Alizebeth,’ he said. ‘Answer his questions. Be courteous. His manner can be strange.’

I felt that he was trying to be kind, trying to prepare me for what might be a difficult situation.

‘When you say “strange”, sir...’

‘I mean that the weight of faith weighs upon men such as he. His mind is oftentimes elsewhere, involved in the invisible symmetries of devotion. You may find him distant.’

I nodded.

‘There may be testing. For that we will go to the brass room. He will want you to be tested, and the mediators will want to watch him test you.’

‘Mediators?’

‘Do not trouble yourself about it,’ he said.

‘I wish to please and serve the holy father as my Emperor,’ I said. ‘I can know that better if I understand what he needs me to do.’

He looked at me, surprised.

‘You urged me to cooperate,’ I said.

He shrugged and nodded.

‘The mediators represent the interests of a party that is collaborating with the Sancour diocese. They will be present, but you will not see them.’

‘Because they wish to remain anonymous?’

‘Yes, and because they are not—’ He stopped, thought better of it, and said, ‘Yes, let that be the reason.’

I was quite sure he had been going to say, 'Because they are not easy to behold.'

The staircase finally brought us to the open floor of the basilica and we stepped off. Wardens in saint masks bowed as the confessor passed. Pilgrims lay face-down on the flagged floor, arms spread, foreheads on the cold stone. Horns blew from one corner of the place, and a hollow voice boomed from another. It seemed to me as though several services and ceremonies were being conducted simultaneously under one roof. I glanced up at the yawning faces that surrounded us, gold like angels, immense as the sky, the staircases gliding down from their lips like the tongues of lizards.

Hodi led me to the pews. It was quite a long walk. Not only was the place so large that multiple services were taking place, it was so large that many functions were co-existing, as in a commercial market. Here, a group of pilgrims stood in prayer around a stone plaque on the floor commemorating some lost person of note. There, a warden led a party on a guided tour of the frescoes. Here, a row of mothers brought their children to a font to be baptised. There, a leper begged for alms. Here, choristers in white robes ran to catch up with their preacher. There, a naked man stood on a stone block to demonstrate his devotion.

Across from us, pilgrims were threading into the shrine chambers under the staircases. Behind us, in one section of the pews, a preacher conducted a service of deliverance for a group of Imperial Guardsmen. They were dressed in red, with black hoods on their caps to show respect for the dead they were honouring. To our right, a deacon on a small wooden podium was reciting a lesson for a gathered crowd. To our left, a group of children from the mission's scholam progenium sat on the floor around their master as he instructed them in the observances.

The last sight made me sad, for it all too strongly reminded me of another school.

Hodi gestured for me to sit in an empty pew. I sat. Two rows ahead of me, a woman was sobbing and hugging a swaddled child to herself. A row behind, an old man sat staring at a worn medal that showed the God-Emperor of Mankind.

'Wait here,' said Hodi, and walked off in the direction of the altar. In less than a minute, he was just a speck among specks, dwarfed by the golden angels that supported the oratory platform, which in turn were dwarfed by



the polished black tree trunks of the organ pipes.

I waited, obediently. It occurred to me to run, but it was a very great open space, and there were too many potential enemies disguised among the bustling thousands around me. So I waited. An old man, his face, neck and upper spine gnarled by shiftlag palsy, came and sat at the end of my pew. He leaned forwards, resting his elbows on the pew in front, and started to pray. For his own mortal repair, I imagined. I felt the wooden seat under me vibrate with the tremors of his neurally devastated body. A girl took a place three rows ahead of me. She sat gazing at the high altar, her head on one side in contemplation. Without looking, she mortified the flesh of her left forearm with iron thorns bound around her right hand. Prayer drones buzzed around the pews, flashing gospel quotations on their sizzling brown screens. One was a large model formed by two golden mechanical cherubs supporting a gilt-framed screen between them, like an airborne version of some ornate overmantel mirror. The beaming mechanical cherubs took it in turns to squeal 'Regard! Regard!' as they swung the screen from pilgrim to pilgrim. They reminded me too much of Blackwards' frightful dolls.

I looked away. The confessor was taking a long time. I began to wonder if Hodi was more sympathetic to my cause than I had first appreciated. Was he deliberately delaying his return? Was I supposed to run for it while he was gone? Would he come back and be dismayed to find me still here?

I looked around. A man had sat down in the pews across the aisle, almost level with me. He had a large, powerful build, and was dressed in black. He was not a young man: his scalp was bald, and his craggy face showed the signs of old scars, but his bearing was noble and his demeanour grave. There was a power to him. I imagined he was a high-ranking veteran officer of the guard, a general. He had that air. His long, heavy coat was black, but it was shot through with green thread and had an elegant golden trim. He sat stiffly, as if he was somehow crippled, or his body was surgically braced.

As I looked at him, he looked at me. It was the oddest thing. He reacted, yet he did not react. His expression did not in any way change to show surprise or interest or contempt or any other thing. But his eyes showed me something. He was astonished by me. It was recognition, and there was genuine pain in that recognition. He was quite taken aback by the sight of me.

I did not think this was a usual thing. It was not the look, say, of a lascivious older man who might spy a young girl who takes his fancy and

gazes upon her. This was the look a man might have upon being reunited, unexpectedly, with a long-lost sibling, or a father might have upon seeing a child he believed dead. It was the look of a person who remembers a loved one long lost.

He stared at me. He could not help it. I went to look away, because it was uncomfortable, and at the same moment he managed to wrench his gaze aside, realising that he was staring. He did not get up and approach me, nor did he go away. I was aware that I kept looking at him.

I imagined scenarios. If he was a veteran general of the Emperor's Guard, perhaps I reminded him of the girl he'd left behind, or a long-dead wife, or a favourite trooper lost on the line.

+Alizebeth.+

I heard my name spoken, but I did not hear it with my ears. The soft whisper of a psyker had spoken to me. I looked around, alarmed.

The man was staring at me again. Was it him? I wondered if I should switch my cuff, but I had been told not to. He was looking at me so keenly. He had one hand placed on the back of the pew in front of him, as if he was about to pull himself to his feet and come over to me.

But he hesitated. He had seen something.

'You took some looking for.'

I snapped around at the voice, and found Lightburn taking a seat on the pew beside me. The Curst kept his eyes straight ahead, as though he were just another pilgrim who happened to be sitting down next to me.

'How did you find me?' I asked

'It weren't easy at all,' he replied.

'But how?'

'You won't believe me. That goat Shadrake.'

'Shadrake?'

Lightburn risked casting a glance at me, and mimicked the wretched artist's way of holding up his sighting glass to see through it.

'I don't know how, but he spied you. Looked through that glass of his and told me we'd find you at the basilica.'

'I feared you'd suppose I'd just given you the slip,' I said.

'I did at first,' he admitted. 'But then we saw the mess in the painting room upstairs, and I found this pinning some scrap of cloth to a table.'

He opened his hand on the seat beside me to show me the bent silver telekine pin. I reached out my left hand under the line of the pew back and

he passed it to me.

‘I saw that, and I knew you’d been taken or something,’ he said, still looking straight ahead as though he was talking to himself. ‘Then Shadrake says he can help us find you again.’

‘Renner, you said “us”, and before that you said “we”. Who do you mean?’

‘Your friend, he showed up,’ said Lightburn.

‘Judika?’

‘Uh huh,’ he said, nodding. ‘About an hour, maybe two, after we found you’d gone, he turns up.’

‘Is he here?’

‘Yeah, but not down here. I came in here, he circled around the upper walks to see if he could spot you. We’ve come to have you out of here.’

‘It won’t be that easy,’ I said. ‘There is a psyker close by.’

‘A devil like that? In a church?’ Lightburn asked, horrified.

‘And besides, there are other enemies all around,’ I said, ‘unseen in the crowd. I fear that they might reveal themselves and slay you if you try to take me from here.’

‘They can try,’ he replied.

‘Renner, we are outnumbered and exposed,’ I said. ‘Do *not* try.’

‘Then what? Just sit here? Who’s brought you here? What do they want with you?’

‘I don’t know the half of who brought me here, and I don’t know at all what they want of me,’ I said. ‘But I am caught here by powerful persons. Men of the Church, Renner. Their reach, power and influence are mighty, and we are right in the heart of their world. Go and find Judika. Tell him I am to be taken to the Pontifex. I do not think they will kill me. Perhaps he can use the authority of his rosette to approach the office of the Pontifex through an official channel.’

‘The what of his what?’

‘Just go and tell him,’ I said, whispering urgently. ‘Mr Lightburn, I believe there are more effective and thorough ways to get me out of this predicament than either fleeing from this seat or starting a fight.’

‘I don’t,’ he replied.

‘Then look to your left!’ I hissed, not looking at all.

He did so, and I heard him mutter a quiet oath. Balthus Blackwards, along with Lupan, the other confessor, and the four bodyguards, had just

wandered into view. They came to a halt in the open floor, just a few metres away from the end of the ranks of pews.

‘Go,’ I hissed. ‘Go! Blackwards will recognise you, and he will kill you.’

‘He will not.’

‘He will have his sell-swords do it. You aggrieved him greatly.’

Lightburn plucked up the hood of his black coat to fashion a temporary disguise. He looked sidelong at me.

‘All right,’ he said. He had at least enough sense to know that tangling with four professional bodyguards in a very public space was a terrible idea, even for a man who is so cursed he has nothing much of anything left to lose. ‘All right, I’ll go and tell this to Sowl. But do not do anything foolish. We will come for you.’

‘Your devotion is quite touching, Renner,’ I said.

He frowned. He did not see it that way.

‘If you die horrible before I get you to the mamzel, that’s one burden I won’t never be able to scratch off my skin,’ he said.

He got up, bowed in the direction of the high altar, and slid past me to exit the pew at the end opposite the Blackwards party. Just then, Lupan spotted me and pointed me out to Balthus Blackwards. Neither of them seemed to notice the hooded figure leaving my row.

I turned quickly to see Lightburn away, but the Curst was already lost in the pilgrim crowd. I noticed too that the mysterious man, the veteran general who had been so struck by me, had also disappeared.

I faced front again and saw that Hodi was finally coming back across the open space of the basilica floor towards me. As he approached the ranks of pews, he held out his hand and beckoned to me.

I stood up. I slipped the bent silver pin into my pocket.

## CHAPTER 24

*Which concerns his Holiness and the brass reading room*

I walked across to join Hodi where he waited. I did not feel brave. Once I had reached him, he fell in step with me and we walked across the huge expanse of the open floor towards the high altar. Prayer drones buzzed past us. A man with a wooden tray called out the prices of the parchment blessings he was selling. A brief flurry of raindrops fell on us, milked from the microclimate high in the dome's apex. The spatter of raindrops made me look down at the floor. It was mosaic, a huge mosaic, made up of trillions of tiled fragments. I had heard that only if you climbed up the dome to the very top, and peered in through the skylights at the summit, could you perceive the mosaic image in full and understand what it depicted. This felt, to me, like an adequate metaphor for my life.

An amplified voice was booming out from the direction of the high altar and the oratory platform. The voice had been booming for the whole time, but only now was I getting close enough for it to become the dominant sound.

I realised it was the voice of the Pontifex. It was his daily address and blessing, delivered from the high throne, through vast, augmetic vox systems, the speaker horns of which bloomed like ivory flowers from the mouths of giant, screaming angel statues around the oratory steps. As you approached the high altar, the volume became painful. Dense crowds of pilgrims, hundreds deep, had gathered to stand or kneel at the steps and listen. Many held aloft votive candles, or blessed scrolls, or medals of the God-Emperor, as if they might soak up some benediction that the Pontifex's voice bestowed upon the air.

Precinct wardens, their painted masks beatific, parted the crowd to let Hodi through, and I followed in his slipstream. We went up the steps onto the lower oratory platform, right under the first outcrop of vox speakers. The noise was immense. The voice was so distorted by volume and echo, I could no longer make any distinct sense of it. It was just a noise. Pilgrims covered the steps, many in floods of tears, though whether this was a sign of religious rapture or hearing damage, I could not tell.

Further banks of speakers stood behind the first, huge chrome horns, cones and bells, growing out of the mouths and eyes of the vast statues and carvings that encased the walls on either side. They were all gilded. Prayer drones in great numbers hovered and buzzed in this area, stirring as the sound waves pulsed the air, surrounding the speaker horns like bees or hummingbirds around tropical blooms.

We were now advancing across the lower platform and down the throat of the monolithic ravine that led to the altar. Vertical columns of black and bronze organ pipes lined the cliffs on either side of us, rising some two or three hundred metres into the roof. At various levels, like shelves, hung wooden balconies where choristers sat, waiting to sing. The wooden boxes were brightly decorated with coloured paint and gold leaf. Some were supported on the heads or shoulders of caryatid statues.

I felt sure that, for all I was assailed by the noise of the amplified address, I would like even less to be advancing down that canyon when the organ began to play.

We reached the second ascent to the next platform. More pilgrims clustered here, but they were of a higher class: richer families, nobles, merchants, people who could afford to pay a higher stipend and thus be rewarded by a position closer to the Pontifex. These people, dressed in extraordinary finery, were escorted by immaculate servitors and haughty slaves. Some were sitting in golden walking carriages or ornate mobility carts. Some family groups carried huge oil paintings of the deceased family member they were here to have blessed.

Ahead of us rose the high thrones on their platforms, with the great altar before them. Some magnificent trick of architecture meant that hard columns of sunlight poured down through the canyon gloom from the celestory to spotlight the golden altar.

The 'high thrones' was a misnomer, a throwback to older days. It had originally been where the elders and senior ecclesiarchs sat in audience

before the congregation. Now it was another vast machined cliff of riveted metal, another huge and howling face in bas-relief. This one, the largest of all in the basilica, was made of gold and, from the radiant crown it wore, was supposed to be the God-Emperor. The Pontifex, in his throne, sat in the open mouth of the one-hundred-metre-high face, speaking into the bank of wired vox-casters in front of him.

The skin of the giant face, as I got close enough to see, was like the hull of an oceanic ship: metal beaten together in panels and secured by rivets that could not be seen from a distance. It was, nevertheless, impressive.

We halted for a moment and stood, looking up at the Pontifex as he made his address. This close to the high thrones, only members of the Ecclesiarchy were permitted, or visitors conducted by them. Even the good and the great of society, from the affluent areas of Queen Mab, from Sancour, and the Imperium beyond both, did not approach so close without permission.

The Pontifex Urba sat in a balcony made of a giant lower lip and chin. The vox phones, a jumble of them on many rods and supports, extended up from behind the massive metal teeth at his feet. He was in a great throne, reclining, with his hands on the broad arms of the seat, and his head back against the rest. His head was sunk into his shoulders as though he was weary. He was a big man, softened by a life of lifter frames and augmetic supports, unused to the exertion of his own musculature. He was draped in purple silk, including a huge gold-trimmed chasuble over his vestment robes. He wore a high golden mitre. The words, too loud to be anything except thunder to me any more, poured out of him. This was what it would be like to hear the God-Emperor speak, I felt. It was not an approximation or a surrogate. If the Lord of the Imperium uttered a word, it would be more than sound, more than noise. It would hurt us and unmake us.

Hodi touched my sleeve to indicate we should continue. It was too loud for me to have heard any words from him. He led me across the golden pavement beneath the vast face of the high thrones towards a row of recessional doors to the right. As we began to walk, the Pontifex's address finally came to a close. Trumpets sounded in harsh, blaring relays. I looked up and saw that the Pontifex's throne was withdrawing into the gullet of the huge head, retracted by vast mechanical pistons. As he disappeared, the jaw slowly swung up and the mouth closed.

We went inside, out of the open. As we stepped through the doorway, the

great organ pipes began to play, filling the canyon of the high altar with a terrible dirge.

We entered an anteroom lined with gold. It was like being inside a jewellery box. The floor was crimson velvet. Two dozen ecclesiarchs awaited us: deacons, preachers and other exalted elders. They wore white albs with red or black, or even gold caputiums. At the sight of me, as one, they all put on capirote, the tall, conical hats of penitence. The capirote were so tall they made the assembled priests seem inhuman in form. Their eyes gazed at me through the slits in the cloth of the hats.

Hodi put on one of his own. He led me on, and the priests in their conical hats formed a procession behind us, two abreast.

I honestly believed, at that moment, that I would not be returning from the bowels of the basilica.

From the anteroom, we walked out onto a staircase that wound down into darkness. The staircase was old, perhaps part of an older church upon which the modern basilica had been raised, and it looked to me as though it had been made of bone. It was carved from some hard substance that was white, yellowing with age and worn with use. The staircase was lit by a hundred thousand candles, which were glued by their own dripping wax down the banisters on each side. Fresh candles were evidently lit and squashed into the hot wax every time one went out. Two shrunken men, more like sickly monkeys than humans, cowered at the top of the steps, guarding baskets of fresh candles, wick trimmers and tapers. It was their duty to keep the old staircase lit.

It was a long staircase. The darkness around the golden radiance of the candles grew blacker, and the air colder, a subterranean chill that could only mean we were properly underground. The apocalyptic sounds of the basilica's great organ became increasingly muffled overhead.

A mendicant in pitifully ragged brown robes was waiting for us at the foot of the stairs. I was glad to see him. I was glad to see anyone whose face was not hooded in a devilish cone of white cloth. The descent had been as though we were climbing down through the very void itself on a lighted staircase in the blackness of the interstellar gulfs.

The mendicant bowed, took a large brass key from around his neck, and inserted it into a slot that I realised was not a chink in ground rock, but was in fact a keyhole in a rusted iron plate. The key turned, and a hatch whirled open in the blackness. It opened like the mechanism of a mechanical toy,



dividing in four parts, each quarter withdrawing into a corner of the hole.

A warm orange light shone from within.

What we entered could only have been the brass room that Hodi had mentioned. It was a long chapel crypt with a vaulted roof, entirely lined with brass. Every surface was ornately decorated with etching and bas-relief. Glow-globes hung from wall sconces. The room was a reading room, a library of sorts. It was lined with shelves on which ancient books and data-slates were locked behind brass cage doors. In the open centre of the room there were many study desks and reading lecterns, all made out of brass or beaten copper. Behind us, to the left of the entrance, was a huge copper fireplace, entirely empty, which seemed incongruous. At the far end of the chapel was an oddly battered, disfigured altar, perhaps a distinguished ancient relic that had been carried on crusades and finally placed here for veneration. To the right, beside a doorway that seemed to let through into an annex or side chapel, there was a row of screened wooden doors like confessional boxes built into the wall.

I looked around.

‘Copper and brass,’ I said aloud.

Hodi glanced at me.

‘This is the private reading room. The brass room. Copper and brass are far more inert than silver, gold or iron...’

His voice trailed off. Again, he seemed to think better of telling me things, though it was harder to be sure with his face masked.

There was a sudden noise: a grinding of gears, a hissing of pistons and a clank of metal upon metal. What I had taken to be the great fireplace was opening from behind. It was a mechanism, a machined socket. The massive throne containing the Pontifex was descending from above on its elaborate engineering, and the socket was opening to receive it. It slotted in place with a clang of locating metal tongues and hisses of pneumatic release, and the end of the reading room became a grand throne room, with the Pontifex Urba seated on a chair that had been delivered from the basilica far above by an intricate mechanism.

The priests all genuflected. Hodi took my wrist and led me towards the throne. Steam still trickled from the seams where the throne had plugged into the brass socket.

Close to, I saw that the Pontifex was a sick man. He was old and ludicrously obese. I doubted he could even walk unaided. His cope and

chasuble, both of purple silk, were wrapped around his bloated body like a sack. His head lolled, and his mouth was slack. His eyes did not appear to be able to focus. I saw that his golden mitre had been wired to his scalp to prevent it from falling off with the nods and jerks of his head.

‘Your Holiness,’ Hodi began.

The Pontifex’s lips trembled. He stank of anointing oils. ‘Abraded circumstance,’ he said in a querulous voice that seemed to bubble out of him unevenly, ‘that is a dark place and it contains two stars, one of which is a star and the other is two birds.’

‘We have brought the asset to you, so that you might regard her,’ said Hodi.

‘Dead suns,’ replied the Pontifex, rolling his eyes, unfocused. ‘I can smell them.’

‘She is here, Father.’

The Pontifex gurgled, and saliva popped at the corner of his mouth.

‘They have gills and webbed feet, but they play a sprightly jig!’ the Pontifex replied. He shook a little and chuckled to himself. ‘A sprightly jig.’

His face went grave. His eyes rolled and gazed at something behind us that was not there.

‘In the dark,’ he whispered. ‘Out there. In here.’

He looked at Hodi.

‘I have seen what the dark looks like when the light is on,’ he said. He reached up his left hand and clutched Hodi’s hand in it.

‘Don’t let them know it was me, Kleman,’ he hissed. ‘They keep notes. They whistle. Whistle. Like kettles. Wheeeeeee! When the sun goes in, they caper about. They think I can’t see them, but I can.’

‘Yes, your holiness,’ said Hodi.

‘Wheeeeeeeee!’

‘Is your name Kleman?’ I asked.

Hodi looked at me.

‘No,’ he said.

My voice had brought me to the Pontifex’s attention at last. His head wobbled as he tried to straighten it and focus on me.

‘Why is she taller than a mouse?’ he asked sharply, puzzled.

‘It... it is the Emperor’s will,’ said Hodi.

The Pontifex nodded.

‘Then... good,’ he said, satisfied. ‘Good. Can she be nothing or pass into

nothing? Does she make a ripple when she drops into the pool? I... remember something else, but I forget what.'

'We have made some preliminary examinations,' said Hodi. 'She is a blacksoul, we believe. A genetic carnate, perhaps of manipulated stock, but not an artificial. Not a simulation. The King knows his business.'

'King ping ping ding,' said the Pontifex. He was drooling on his silk chasuble.

'We can begin the assay, if you like?' Hodi suggested.

'Pink worms in a heart that tries not to beat because you might understand what it taps out,' the Pontifex said, patting his hands against the arms of his throne spasmodically. Each word was a huge effort to say, because he appeared to be trying to sing at the same time.

'Confessor, the mediators,' one of the priests coughed.

We looked around. Lamps had come on behind the screened wooden doors on the far side of the room, and three figures had entered the boxes, presumably from whatever room adjoined them on the other side of the wall. They were silhouettes against the mesh, humanoid shapes that gazed in at us but which we could not fully see.

I was quite sure that they were not human. Unless the lamps were causing some trick of light and shadow, they were simply far too big.

One of them spoke. The voice, as deep and cold as an ocean floor, came out through speakers built into the screened doors.

'Displeasure is expressed,' it said. 'You have begun the consistory without us.'

'Ding dong,' sputtered the Pontifex. 'Silly dilly dilly—'

He was growing agitated. His hands flapped and his head wobbled furiously. His eyes did not seem to be able to focus on anything. There was a sudden and foul scent that suggested he might have soiled himself. Two of the priests bustled forwards to inject something into his neck.

'We have not begun,' Hodi said, turning to face the screened doors. 'We have simply assembled. The Pontifex has only just arrived and we were getting him settled. No business has been conducted, nor would it be conducted, without your presence.'

'This small immature female is the one we have been summoned to examine?' asked another, its voice even deeper than the first, if that were possible.

'She is deserving of your attention,' Hodi replied.

‘No,’ replied the first. ‘She is no blacksoul. Our measurements tell us that, even though she is limited. She is barely a blank, even. Your procurer has misled you.’

‘He should be executed,’ said the second.

‘I think a test is at least in order,’ said Hodi.

‘You waste our time and abuse our patience,’ said the third figure behind the screened doors.

‘Milk!’ the Pontifex suddenly cried out. ‘A thousand hundreds of silver eyes, all of them downcast! A word that means word.’

‘Must he be here?’ one of the shadows growled. ‘He is disruptive. His mind is addled. You test our tolerance fo—’

‘He can see,’ replied Hodi, cutting the deep voice short. ‘His mind is unfettered because he has been allowed to see, and his sight is all that guides us. If he was mad, or depraved, we would not hold him in any reverence, even within the arcane structures of the Ecclesiarchy. We do not tolerate him because he was once our noble lord. We worship him because he still is. He can see what we cannot. He is the greatest of us, and you should be ashamed that you do not appreciate his worth. Your master surely would have done. He would have coined for him a word all his own, to honour him.’

‘Do not presume—’ one of the shadows said.

‘Do not insult,’ Hodi replied. ‘You are here by our permission. You are here under our terms. You mediate only. Sometimes you forget yourselves.’

‘Test her then,’ said the first shadow. ‘Test her if you will. Prove that we are wrong. But she is a liar and a sham. This we already know.’

‘Indeed?’ asked Hodi.

‘She gave her name as Alizebeth Bequin,’ said the first shadow. ‘Alizebeth Bequin was a pariah untouchable who served the staff of the Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn. She was born on Bonaventure circa 210, and died on Durer in 386, over one hundred years ago.’

# CHAPTER 25

## *Which concerns utterances*

There was a pause. Hodi cleared his throat and said, 'That is irrelevant. How many millions of individuals with that name are there in the Imperium?'

'How many claim to be untouchables?' asked the shadow.

'We will conduct the assay,' Hodi replied. The ecclesiarchs around us immediately began to prepare the room. Lecterns were moved and books put away. I saw Hodi catch one preacher by the sleeve as he went by and say, 'Go and find Blackwards. Bring him to the foot of the staircase. Ask him what he has to say about this information. Ask him about provenance. Explain to him that the Church will take a dim view if he has used his emporium's exceptional reputation to dupe us.'

The preacher nodded and hurried out. Hodi looked at me.

'Do you have any comment to make?' he asked.

'Only that I know my own name,' I replied.

Behind us, the Pontifex was becoming agitated. I heard him stammering. 'Footsteps! Footsteps! One after another! Each one a century after the last! A slow walk! A slow walk into a dark place!'

'He wants to speak to her,' one of the ecclesiarchs said to Hodi. The confessor led me back to the Pontifex's throne. The Pontifex was blinking frantically and swallowing hard, as if he had been dazzled by a bright light. His head lolled around, bunching the loose folds of his fat cheeks, and he looked at me. For the first time, he seemed to focus. For the first time he appeared to see me properly.

'Daesumnor,' he murmured sadly. 'Daesumnor.' He let out a little frail

whine, a melancholy sound. 'Alizebeth.'

'Your holiness?'

'You are condemned to... to walk in dark places. A long walk. They're sorry for that.'

'Where will I walk to?'

He didn't show any signs of hearing me. His eyes rolled.

'They think it's an echo, just an echo of an old, vengeful spirit, but it's not. It's here. You'll see. It is forever. It has endured. It's as old as anything human can be, as old as the old man on the gold chair.'

I glanced at Hodi. His eyes, in the slits of his mask, betrayed worry.

'I have seen your soul,' the Pontifex whispered, dribbling again, his eyes bright. 'It is no blacksoul. It is better and brighter. It is shining. I have seen it. Look! Look, there it is.'

Both Hodi and I turned to look where he pointed, then felt foolish.

'We're taxing him,' Hodi told me.

'Don't!' the Pontifex protested. 'I have a list of things to tell her. Very important. Very very ferry cherry. Ooh! Tell him. Tell him this! Tell him Daesumnor hides behind the pictures, but that's just a distraction.'

'I don't—' I began.

'He'll know. Tell him about the crackle of the Eight. Tell him about that. Tell him that's how to know where they're inside. And tell him – Oooh, this is important too! – Tell him that the graels don't matter. What matters is who *commands* the graels.'

'Leave him, he's getting tired,' said Hodi.

'Who should command them?' I asked. I had an overwhelming sense that some terrible truth lay disguised behind his madness. He'd just used a word that I'd heard under very trying circumstances the night the Maze Undue fell: *grael*. I tried to prompt clarity from him by using some of the vocabulary I had heard in the last few hours.

'Should the King command them?' I asked. 'Or the Eight?'

He shook his head so hard spittle flew and his cheeks wobbled. 'The Eight are the Eight and who knows what they ate. They just do the bidding of the King. If the King commands them, I don't know what we shall do with ourselves.'

'Come away,' said Hodi, dragging me back. 'He will make himself ill.'

'I want to—'

'The assay must begin,' Hodi snapped at me. 'Do not be vexatious.'

‘Who is he?’ I called out to the Pontifex as I was led away. ‘Who is the he that I’m supposed to tell this to?’

Twitching in his throne, no longer looking at me, the Pontifex let out a long, hissing gurgle, like a release of steam under pressure. It sounded like a word. It sounded like, ‘*Thorn!*’

Hodi led me into the centre of the room, which had been cleared by the ecclesiarchs. A single brass lectern remained in position, facing the battered old altar down the length of the library chamber. Oddly, it reminded me of the shooting gallery in the drill of the Maze Undue.

‘Stand here,’ he said. I stood at the lectern, my back to the Pontifex’s throne. The strange screened doors and the shadows behind them were to my left. The ecclesiarchs formed a semi-circle behind me. I was not sure what they expected me to do. They made me wait while they fussed around. Some had data-slates and were making notes, others had produced measuring instruments and ticking, whirring cogitators of hand-held design. To my increasing consternation, junior servants of the basilica filed into the brass room carrying long metal shields. The shields were tall and oblong, like pavises or the riot shields sometimes carried by the city watch or the Arbites Magistratum. But these were made of copper, and had been baffled at the back with what looked like ballistic cloth. The servants erected the shields on metal floor stands in an arc in front of the ecclesiarchs, the shield fronts facing me.

‘What is that about?’ I asked Hodi. He did not reply.

Various lectionaries and breviaries were selected from the shelves around us, the caged doors being unlocked and opened for them to be reached. Hodi placed each work in turn on the lectern before me, indicated a passage, and told me to read.

I did as I was told.

Behind me, behind the shields, the ecclesiarchs in their ridiculous cone hats muttered and conferred, making marks upon their data-slates and measurements with their instruments. I heard murmurs of ambient temperatures, air pressure, and other almost meteorological aspects. Behind them, the Pontifex Urba sat in his throne, mewling like a restless child, and fidgeting with his hands.

To my right, the shadows lurked behind the mesh screens of the wooden doors.

Hodi stopped me a few lines into each passage, took the breviary away and

replaced it with another. After perhaps twenty minutes of this, he seemed content, and had the servants put the books away in the caged shelves. The confessor went to confer with the ecclesiarchs behind the shields.

For the most part, I had not really understood what I had been reading. A few pieces of liturgy I knew, once the words of a famous canticle. Otherwise they seemed to have been obscure compositions of divinity. With two of the pieces, I did not even recognise the language, but just sounded them out phonetically.

Confessor Hodi returned to my side. He took hold of my chin with his hand and turned my head so he could look into my eyes. Then he pulled my mouth open so he could peer inside.

He let go.

‘Finished?’ I asked.

‘Any discomfort?’ he asked me.

‘Well, you pulling my face around wasn’t pleasant,’ I replied.

‘Any headaches? Increases in anxiety? Indigestion? Joint pain? Hot flushes? Stress?’

‘Stress?’ I asked him flatly. ‘Why in Terra’s name would I be experiencing any stress?’

‘She is too wilful,’ remarked one of the screened shadows. Its voice was as profound and lifeless as heat death, but I was past fear by then.

‘I don’t care a rat’s tail for your opinion,’ I said, looking directly at the screened panels. ‘You hide in the shadows. Nothing about you may be trusted.’

‘You do not want to behold us,’ said the second shadow.

‘Perhaps I do,’ I replied.

‘Shut up!’ Hodi snapped at me. ‘The mediators are— Don’t provoke them. Just *don’t*. Know your place.’

I shrugged. Hodi made a gesture, and a prayer drone hovered into place in front of us. Like the one I’d seen up in the basilica, it was fashioned from two mechanical cherubs holding a gilt-framed screen between them. They were made of copper and brass too. They muttered and ticked like aggravated insects as they hovered before me, holding the screen at eye level. Their tiny wings purred like miniature turbofans.

A portion of text appeared on the screen. It was not written in a language I knew, but it used characters I recognised. The screen flickered slightly, as if the projection unit was faulty or running slow.



‘Read that, please,’ Hodi said. This time he stepped back.

I began to read it out. It was weighty and difficult. Sounding the words phonetically was complex, and I wasn’t sure how well I was doing. It felt as though I was having to chew the words out of my mouth. I was pretty sure that whatever this prose was, it was stylistically florid and over-complex. It just seemed to be so freighted, as if meaning and import had been forced together to breaking point.

I kept reading, struggling with it, for a full three minutes. Then I heard a sound behind me. I stopped and turned in time to see one of the hooded ecclesiarchs rushing from the room, his hand clamped to his mouth. We heard him outside, retching and heaving, fluid spattering on the doorstep.

I frowned. Another of the ecclesiarchs had, at some point during my reading, been obliged to sit down on the floor behind the shields. He was breathing hard, his hands on his chest as though he was suffering heart palpitations. At least two others were leaning with their hands braced against the shield tops, also trying to recover their breath.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

Hodi looked at me. I could see a slight dark patch on his mask where his mouth was, as though moisture from his own laboured breathing had dampened it.

‘Do you feel quite well?’ he asked, his voice hoarse.

‘Yes, perfectly,’ I replied. ‘What just occurred?’

He ignored me and turned to his colleagues.

‘Composite your readings!’ he ordered. One of the ecclesiarchs started talking about ‘micro-changes’ and another of a ‘scale four temperature drop’. Another was reaching his hand up under his capirote. There was a bright stain on the white cloth of his mask. He had suffered a nose bleed.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said, but no one was listening to me. Then I noticed something. I stepped down from the lectern and walked the length of the crypt to the battered old altar. The prayer drone, wings buzzing, obediently followed me.

Hodi turned and saw me walking towards the altar. He called out to me to come back, but I ignored him.

I knelt down and looked at the old relic. It had once been a very fine piece, an altarpiece of significant worth, beautifully decorated and inlaid. But age had abused it. It was battered and buckled, dented and scratched, as though it had been beaten with sledgehammers and struck with pickaxes. The

surface was rutted and gouged, and the very form of it was misshapen. It was also discoloured and patched with scabs of rust.

What I had noticed from the vantage of the lectern was a large stain of verdigris on the right-hand side of the altar. I was sure it had not been there before. I wondered how it could have formed so rapidly. Close to, I noticed how what looked like ice crystals had formed along the top surface of the altarpiece.

‘Explain this!’ I called out.

‘Come back here!’ Hodi replied.

I reached up and grabbed the edge of the prayer drone’s screen, tilting it towards me. The wings of the cherubs beat noisily as they adjusted their hover.

I started to read again, slowly, a syllable at a time.

As I watched, with each syllable, the patch of verdigris grew larger. At one point, I stopped abruptly, and then restarted suddenly, and the growth matched the pace of my reading.

I stopped. I got up. I walked back towards Hodi, the prayer drone burbling lazily behind me. All the ecclesiarchs were looking at me.

‘What are you making me do?’ I asked. ‘What is happening here?’

‘Just do as we instruct you,’ replied the confessor.

‘What words are these?’ I demanded, pointing at the prayer drone. ‘What are they from?’

‘They are our words,’ said one of the shadows behind the screen.

‘They are words our lord wrote,’ said another.

‘Who is your lord?’ I asked.

‘You will not speak his name,’ said the third.

‘Then what is his book?’ I asked.

‘It is one book,’ said the first.

‘In many volumes,’ said the second.

‘Begun but never ending,’ said the third.

‘Take up your place here!’ Hodi snapped at me, pointing to the lectern.

I walked back to it reluctantly. He brought the prayer drone in again, and set it hovering in front of me.

‘We will continue and use one of the words,’ he said.

‘Agreed,’ said the first shadow. ‘Despite her attitude, we are interested in the female’s performance.’

Hodi looked at me. In his eyes behind the cloth hood, I could see tension.

‘One word,’ he said. ‘Focus and say it clearly.’

He touched the hovering screen and a word appeared. The screen fizzled and blinked, as if it was having great difficulty maintaining resolution.

I looked at it.

I spoke the word.

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# CHAPTER 26

## *The word, and after*

I do not know or understand what the word was. The moment I uttered it, it seemed to be released from me with some force, and was gone from my memory.

Then a thing that I cannot explain happened. The ancient altar at the far end of the brass room leapt into the air. It leapt into the air and buckled as it did so, and shredded apart in an explosive manner, as though it had been struck by some immense weight, which had broken it and strewn its twisted metal fragments in all directions, or as though a grenade had been placed inside it and detonated. Chips of brass shrapnel bounced off the walls, the ceiling and the caged shelves, and rained to the ground around us, jingling like dropped coins.

I found I had fallen over. I picked myself up off my hands and knees. There was a ringing in my ears. The lectern had overturned. I saw the prayer drone lying on the ground a few metres away, wrecked and mangled, sparks spitting from its ruptured casing, its screen cracked and dead.

I turned around. I put my hand to my mouth and found a drop of blood. I had very slightly split my lower lip.

The ecclesiarchs were in a state of confusion. Some had fallen down too, as had at least three of the shields. Many were swaying as if concussed. All of their hand-held instruments had shorted out and failed.

‘Now you explain,’ I said to Hodi.

‘We will place you in a holding facility,’ he said, struggling to retain his composure.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘You will explain this. You will do it now.’

‘It is not your place to—’ he began to declare.

‘Do not make me say the word again,’ I said.

In truth, I did not remember the word to say it again, but he did not know that.

‘Control her!’ one of the shadows demanded.

‘The female has performed and survived the first assay of Enuncia better than any specimen before her,’ said the second. ‘She will be prioritised for development by the host.’

‘She is our property,’ Hodi snapped at them. ‘You do not own us, and neither do you give us orders! You are our partners in this enterprise, but you do not take what we have gone to great lengths to acquire!’

‘Control her, or we will control her,’ said the shadow. ‘And we *will* take whatever we want, if it is necessary to the cause.’

Hodi looked at me and pulled off his capirote. His face was flushed and his hair lank with sweat.

‘For Throne’s sake, cooperate with me,’ he said, ‘or they will take you and you do *not* want that!’

The Pontifex Urba suddenly let out a piercing wail. We looked over at him and saw he was sprawling back in his throne, afflicted by tremors. Some attack had overcome him. He was gazing up at the ceiling, and had rammed his head back so far against the throneback it had dislodged the golden mitre despite the wires holding it in place. The Pontifex appeared to be bleeding from the mouth.

‘What is it?’ Hodi demanded.

‘Perhaps an after-phrase?’ one of the ecclesiarchs suggested. ‘An echo of the enunciation?’

‘Send for the medicaes!’ Hodi barked. ‘Get a doctor of physik here at once! And secure the room.’

The poor Pontifex continued to wail and thrash and bleed. A detachment of church wardens hurried in from the anteroom. They wore the robes and painted saint masks of the ones who maintained the basilica precinct, but their robes were blue, and they were overtopped by shirts of segmented ceramite and brass armour. They carried force poles and had *cutros* strapped to their hips in copper scabbards.

I thought, since when do the male servants of the Ecclesiarchy come armed?

‘Guard her,’ Hodi told them, pointing at me. A trio of doctors, medicae in

red albs, had also come running into the reading room to attend the Pontifex.

One of the shadows behind the screened doors insisted that Hodi account for the situation. The voice was like an anvil scraping across stone.

Hodi turned and glared at the shadows.

‘Withdraw!’ he declared. ‘Withdraw, and quickly now! Go to the undercells and prepare to leave the compound entirely if necessary.’

‘Displeasure is expressed,’ said the first shadow. ‘You seek to exclude us from the consistory and to keep the female for your own use—’

‘Warp take you, Scarpac!’ Hodi snarled. ‘Work with us as you promised! We don’t yet know what this is. Withdraw until we have made the area safe!’

The huge shadows loomed for a moment against the backlit screens, and then vanished back into whatever chamber lay behind the wooden partition.

The Pontifex was no better. Blood was now drooling out between his teeth in considerable quantities.

It was then I saw the key. It was a small brass key, one of the ones that secured the caged doors protecting the shelves of ancient tomes. An ecclesiarch had left it in the lock when fetching or replacing one of the breviaries I had read from.

I saw it wriggle in the lock. It wriggled, then it popped out of the lock all by itself and flew onto the floor. A moment later, the cage doors of the shelf swung open by themselves.

‘Confessor?’ I called. The armed wardens ringed me, and none of them had seen it. They were all too agitated by the shouting and commotion of the ecclesiarchs and doctors gathered around the ailing Pontifex.

I felt the floor tremble slightly.

‘Confessor?’ I called again. ‘Hodi!’

He turned to regard me, angry and preoccupied.

‘What?’ he snapped.

‘Look,’ I said.

The floor quivered again. The best way I can describe it is as though a giant footstep had stirred the room. I pointed at the shelves. With a sharp metal crack, several of the door locks failed, and the caged doors swung loose under their own weight.

‘Oh holy light...’ Hodi murmured, his eyes widening. One by one, the ecclesiarchs had stopped jabbering and turned to see what was happening.

The room grew quieter and quieter until the only sound was the whimpering of the Pontifex.

The floor trembled for a third time. Another lock broke like a pistol shot. Two books fell off a high shelf and slapped onto the brass floor.

Our breaths were suddenly smoke at our lips and nostrils. The air temperature in the room plummeted. Frost began to form on the metal surfaces.

Hodi bent down and ran his finger through the rime.

‘Eudaemonic ice,’ he murmured. ‘We have to clear the room. We have to clear the room *now*.’

He rose.

‘Wardens, take her to the nearest anechoic bunker,’ he said. ‘Doctors, let’s make to carry his Holiness to—’

He did not get any further. A wind screamed out of nowhere, streaming through a chamber whose doors were closed. It was a hot gust, like the breath of a furnace, for it prickled our skins, but it did not melt the ice nor did it dispel the steam blooming as we exhaled.

More shelf doors ripped open and books began to fly out. They spewed out as though invisible hands were raking along each shelf in turn, cascading them into the air so that they spilled, covers opening, pages flying, spines breaking. Broken books and loose pages covered the floor, and torn paper billowed in the air like snow. Some of the airborne scraps began to glow and then burn.

A light came into the room. It came up through the floor, as if the beaten copper deck was a golden pool and the light was a submarine beast breaking the flat surface and emerging into the air. It was a terrible, bloodshot light, a thing of malice. It made a vaguely humanoid shape out of the bloody sunset light that composed it, and that shape writhed and crackled internally, as though it was made of electric insects or radioactive beads.

It was the thought-form that had blasted through the Maze Undue.

It was the thing that had called itself Grael Magent.

# CHAPTER 27

*In which there is a degree of pandemonium*

Two of the saint-faced wardens began to manhandle me towards the door. The other wardens turned to face the light and formed a protective ring around us. The fierce, hot wind was in our faces, flapping at hair and robes. Some of the ecclesiarchs stepped forwards to face the bloodshot light. One raised the brass icon he was holding, a censer set with images of the primarchs.

‘I abjure thee, unclean spirit!’ I heard him yell. ‘I renounce thee and cast thee back, into the immaterium whence thou emerged!’

The thought-form crackled. The defiant ecclesiarch began to leave the ground. His alb flapped around his floating ankles. He cried out. He left one slipper behind. His feet wiggled.

He rose slowly, as though the reading room was rapidly filling with water and he was being carried, buoyant, towards the ceiling by the rising surface. He dropped the icon, which hit the ground and broke, and started to claw at the air around him, as though trying to fight off or prise away the telekinetic grip that had him in its grasp.

It did no good. Vertical, he continued to ascend until he began to approach the ornate brass roof. He attempted to duck his head away, to bend, but his spine was rigid. Crying out again, he started to batter his fists at the approaching ceiling. Then he pressed his hands flat against the metal to stop his ascent.

It was still to no avail. He rose as slowly and inexorably as though he had been standing on an elevator platform. His head hit the ceiling, and he was forced to cock it aside against his shoulder as he continued to rise. His



hands were splayed against the ceiling, his arms bent. He looked like a weight-lifter trying to clean and jerk the whole ceiling, except his feet were paddling like a swimmer's. The ceiling started pressing onto his shoulders. His head was forced to bend forwards so that his chin was on his chest. His hands slipped and scrabbled. He looked, to my horrified eyes, like the primordial demigod Atlas carrying a world on his shoulders.

Then there was a crack, a ripple of cracks, sharp-pistol shots that we heard above the roar of the wind. The ecclesiarch's hands went limp and his arms fell slackly to his sides. His feet danced for a second, like the feet of a man hanged from a black-iron platform on Ropeburn. He continued to ascend, slowly and relentlessly. The shoulders, pressed into the ceiling, were dislocating and bulging under the alb, and the man's head hung too far down his chest, at an impossible angle. Blood began to drizzle out from under the skirts of his alb.

The devotion and courage of the ecclesiarchs was humbling. Despite this demonstration of horror, several more, including Hodi, stepped forwards to confront the vaguely humanoid light, all uttering oaths of banishment and deliverance at once, all brandishing icons and amulets.

The thought-form thing, Graef Magent, shivered back from their assault and lashed out. Two of the ecclesiarchs flew away to the right, limbs flailing, robes flapping. They smashed off the ceiling and crashed to the floor, where they were dragged along by some invisible force almost as far as the shattered hulk of the altar. They looked like men carried away by a flash flood.

Three others, one of them Hodi, were hurled to the left. One of these landed across a copper lectern with enough force to break his back. The bloodshot light began to advance, seething like the angry heart of a radioactive furnace.

The Church could not protect me. I had no intention of staying there and making myself another target. At least the tumultuous circumstances afforded me some confusion in which to attempt an escape.

I slipped the bent silver pin out of my pocket and jabbed it into the thumb ball of one of the wardens dragging me. His brethren, in their staunch defensive ring, were already head down into the wind as the thought-form came at them.

The warden cried out in pain, and released his grip. I grabbed his force pole as he stumbled, pulled it out of his grip, and side-smashed him with it,

dropping him onto the floor. The other one was still pulling at me. I spun the pole one-handed to improve my grip on it, activated the power stud, and rammed the end of the charged weapon in his face.

His head snapped back, and the painted saint mask, broken in two, flew off him. As he fell, I turned and ran for the door.

I did not know where I was going, except out of the room, and perhaps back towards the candlelit stairs. Neither did I know quite how far I'd get, except that I trusted the entire precinct would soon be in such a state of pandemonium that I might succeed in getting very far indeed.

For a second, I was stopped in my tracks by a roar. Predators can do that, I believe, carnodons and other large ambush hunters. They can issue a roar of such force and tone that it literally stuns their prey with fear.

That was the quality of the sound I heard, but it was not especially meant for me. It was a declaration of intent, a warning that restraint would not be shown.

It was the full-throated bellow of a raging warrior entering combat.

I still do not believe what I saw occur next. In my memory, it has the quality of a vivid nightmare. What made it all the more extraordinary was that the extraordinary was already under way in that brass chamber. An entirely unnatural event was unfolding, the sort of exceptional thing a citizen of the Imperium might only witness once in his lifetime, if he was unlucky. Onto that, a second extraordinary thing was now being piled, more than the sane mind could even begin to accept.

Two of the three shadows, the mysterious mediators, had come back. They had come back with great haste to confront the thought-form. They came into the open through the screened wooden doors that had masked them, splintering the wood, shredding the screen mesh, completely demolishing the structure of the confessional boxes in their urgency to get out. They were huge, bigger than even their silhouettes had suggested. But, despite their size, they were moving with a speed that was quite abnormal. It was the sprint acceleration you see in some wild animals that reminds you that they are not constructed like us, that the engines of their skeletons and the attachments of their muscles are different, and therefore capable of things that a human body is not. As when you see a cat leap two metres from standing onto a bookcase, or a tinker's simian pet race up the side of a building.

Or a cattle dog plough out of a holloway's darkness and take a warblind

warrior off his feet.

I did not know what the two things were. I could not make sense of them. Then I realised that I must know, for I had seen their forms in countless picture books and data entries, and I had seen their likenesses on statues and banners, in stained-glass windows, and graven on the very walls of the basilica above, between the staircase-mouthed faces with the sun-ray crowns.

They were of the Adeptus Astartes.

They were Space Marines.

One wore a helm, the other did not. The span of their shoulder guards was that of a massive arched doorway, and just as high. Their feet and boots were like the boles of mature trees. The one with the helm, a beaked thing like an anvil, carried a massive weapon in his huge hands. It was slabby and blunt in form, its metal shape scuffed and worn. It was preposterously large, so that any human who might wield it would appear to be a child. It was, I presumed, one of the sacred bolters of the Adeptus Astartes.

The one without the helm had a blade that appeared in form to be a heavy short sword, but which was as long as my leg and as broad as my thigh.

The one with the helm tore through the confessional screens with inhuman speed, ran two or three strides across the floor of the chamber towards the thought-form, halted hard, and swung his weapon up to fire from the hip.

The other followed, smashing a screened section out of its frame. As he landed on the chamber floor, he braced like a great ape, with bent knees, his back bent to throw his head forwards. His arms were pressed to his sides, with the sword clamped in two hands between his knees. The stance made his huge armour-plated shoulders bulge aggressively. His chin jutted forward and his eyes were blazing. It was a threat stance, a challenge. He opened his mouth wide and roared at the thought-form, a noise dreadful in both its volume and its tone.

They were clad in crimson armour, with gunmetal edges, and black emblems upon the vast shoulder shields. The one without the helmet had flesh like cracked bread crust, and slate-grey teeth the shape of iron nails that filled his mouth and jutted forward past his peeled-back lips as he raged, flecked in spittle.

I did not know these things, but I knew for certain that they did not fight in the name of the Emperor any more, nor had they in a very long time. My initial supposition had been wrong. These were not Space Marines at all.

They were Traitor Marines.

Now I wanted to be in that place even less. I remembered myself. I reminded my feet that they took orders from me, and I ran. I fled.

Behind me, the helmed Traitor Marine began to fire. His bolter boomed in the metal box of the reading room, the noise and the concussion pummelling me from behind as I ran for the door.

The searing shells went through the bloodshot light and destroyed the brass shelves and copper panelling along the wall behind it. The impact of each shot was like a small bomb going off.

The thought-form struck back, driving a dozer-blade of telekinetic force at the Traitor Marine. The Traitor Marine staggered back for two or three steps, as if fighting a gale-force blast, his immense feet raking and sparking the copper floor.

The other one, the one without the helm, rose out of his simian stance of feral defiance, and attacked. He went forwards with another abhuman burst of physical acceleration, an animal sprint, right into the bloodshot light, his sword coming back over his right shoulder in a two-handed swing.

I think the sword may have been cursed, or blessed, or otherwise invested with some power. I do not understand such things. These technologies are ancient and arcane. Certainly, his weapon was a singular thing. The physical force of the blow – which, incidentally, would have cloven through and brought down one of the stone columns of the basilica, in my opinion – was entirely beside the point. It was, I am sure, the interaction of materials, the clash of energies, the admixture of warp properties that do not comfortably co-exist in the same plane of the universe. The spectral essence of the thought-form and the foetid energy smoking off the edge of the sword were materials in utter, irreconcilable conflict.

The universe screamed as it tore. It is not a sound that the human mind is comfortable hearing. I have heard its like a precious few times in my life, and just once would have been too many. The universe shrieked. It squealed with inarticulate pain as its fabric ripped apart. Sword and thought-form tried to occupy the same space and, through some esoteric function, reality would not bear it, as with some substance and some reactive *anti*-substance.

As I ran through the door, shoulders down against the wind and pressure blasts coming from behind me, I glanced back in time to see the Traitor Marine thrown back from the impact, and the thought-form lose its coherence and spill out across the room as a bright, wild storm of light. The

thought-form tried to resolve itself, its jagged shape spitting out colour and heat. Its bloodshot light had stained and grown darker as though it was wounded, or angry. The Traitor Marine found his footing again and resumed his attack, ploughing the wretched blade into the hellish light once more.

The Traitor Marine turned briefly and yelled something at his helmed companion. His fellow glanced around, sighted me at the door, and turned to pursue me. Two of the wardens got in his way, more by accident than design. Without breaking stride, he slapped the back of his left fist upwards and sent one flying away, neck broken and skull pulverised. The immense bolter weapon in his right fist clubbed the other down, so that he lay mangled and bloody from the one blow as though he had been run over by a cargo transporter.

The helmed warrior was almost at the door. His size to speed ratio defied reason and common sense.

I was outside, beyond the old rusted hatch. There was no sign of the mendicant. Ahead of me, in the darkness and the cold, lay the grand staircase, its candlelit bone treads extended luminously up and away from me towards some notion of safety.

I took the stairs at a run, two at a time, three even. The thousands of candles glued and wedged onto the banisters on either side of me flashed by like fireflies, and the breeze of my flight made some of them go out and trail grey threads of smoke from their last embers. I ran on. I would not stop unless something stopped me.

Yet the staircase seemed even longer than it had done coming down it. The top was still so far away, a candlelit path stretching up into the cavernous dark.

And something was behind me. Something *was* going to stop me.

The Traitor Marine emerged from the reading room into the darkness at the foot of the staircase, spotted me, and launched himself up the steps after me. He accelerated. He came up like a bull ape, almost pounding on his hands and feet, his legs and arms hurling his body mass forwards in a gallop that shook the staircase and shivered all the candles. He came six or eight or ten steps at a time. He had clamped his bolter to his back. From that I took some consolation, for it indicated that he did not simply intend to shoot me, or kill me, which he could so easily have done without giving chase.

He wanted me alive.

The more I thought about this, the less it seemed like consolation.

I could not outrun him. I was fit and motivated by fear and self-preservation, but even so I was only, at best, two-thirds of the way up the staircase. The Traitor Marine was closing fast.

I lost my footing once, and went down on one hand, recovered, and then fell again. I fell onto the edges of the stairs, bruising my hands and arms, but leapt to my feet again and kept running.

It was hopeless.

He was just metres behind me. The bone staircase was shaking under his weight as though the earth was quaking. I think I screamed at that point, though it was more a furious expression of helplessness and frustration than a cry of mortal dread. I threw the force pole behind me, and it bounced ineffectually off his shoulder. Fists clenched, arms pumping, I ran on, up, three stairs at every bound.

There was a man in front of me. He was standing on the bone stairs in my path looking down at me, framed by the receding lines of candles. His craggy face was scarred. He was dressed in black, but his long, heavy coat was shot through with green thread and had an elegant golden trim.

He had a large, old sword in his hand.

It was the mysterious man from the pews, the one I had taken to be a veteran officer of the Guard.

He looked me straight in the eyes as I ran towards him, apparently oblivious of the monstrous crimson horror that was right at my heels.

His face was expressionless.

His eyes found mine and he said, 'Get down.'

# CHAPTER 28

## *Near to death*

It was not an order, or even advice. It instantly became what I was doing. In some way that I could not explain, he had enforced his will upon me with those words. I immediately fell flat on the stairs at his feet as surely as though I had tripped. I remember seeing his black-booted feet three or four steps up the staircase from me. The boots were secured to heavy, black augmetic frames that shored up the man's legs under his coat.

Nevertheless, he was not limited in motion.

I landed flat at his feet, but rolled aside almost at once so I would not be trampled by the Traitor Marine behind me. I rolled fast, banging my back, elbows and the back of my skull against the wood and bone banisters. Hot wax showered down on me from the hundreds of rattled candles.

As I rolled, I saw the man leave the stairs in a great, dauntless bound. He cleared me entirely, leaping off the stairs into the face of the oncoming monster, to meet it head-on. He was in mid-air above me, his sword scything through the darkness in a single-handed stroke as he leapt, heading for the inevitable impact.

They struck. From his mid-air leap, the descending man, big by human standards, met the ascending giant. I was all but underneath them when they connected. The mutual impact stopped them both, and slammed them off each other. Only the old, broad sword in the man's fists refused to rebound. It simply finished its arc.

The man fell backwards onto the stairs, almost crushing me beneath his ironbound mass. The bone treads of the stairs cracked under his impact, and I heard him grunt in pain. He thrashed, sword in hand, to get back on his

feet.

The Traitor Marine was thrown backwards down the staircase. He did not fall far. In truth, I think he was surprised that a man, even a large one, had been able to check him in his tracks at all. The Traitor Marine fell clumsily, striking the banister rail and half-sliding down it, sending candles and fragments of wax exploding out from under his armoured body. Some of the candles were still alight. He cleared four or five metres of banister rail of the candles that had been stuck to it forever.

But he was Adeptus Astartes. He regained his footing. He stopped his half-fall, half-slide. He sprang forwards again, coming back up at us.

Then he stopped. He had suddenly realised something.

There was a slit in his armour. It started at the base of his neck and went across his chest and out under his right arm. It was only a hairline crack, a barely noticeable fissure. But it was clean through his armour. As he moved, we could see the two edges of the slit moving against each other, as if they were independently articulated segments. We could see the bright lips of the sheared metal and ceramite.

Then the blood came. It jetted out of the slit, great squirting gouts of black blood that stank in the cold darkness.

The Traitor Marine roared in pain or outrage, and staggered back down a step or two, his huge left hand clamped to the thin but astonishing slit. Blood spurted out between his fingers and streamed down the belly and flanks of his armour.

Back on his feet, the man assumed a braced position, his sword ready in a two-handed grip. His shoulders were hunched. He glanced back at me.

‘Get out,’ he said.

Once again, I had no choice. His will compelled me. I leapt up and started to run up the stairs again, though my legs were on fire, my lungs were straining, and my heart was bursting out of my chest.

I ran. I ran, and I left him to face the Traitor Marine. I ran because he had made me run. But he had not willed me not to look back, so as I ran, I did just that.

I saw the Traitor Marine roar. I saw the black blood stop its atrocious jetting and squirting as the transformed biology of the Adeptus Astartes made repairs, clotted the bleeding, and closed the wound. I saw the Traitor Marine unclamp his bolter and bring it up to aim at the man with the sword.

It fired once, and the sword swept to swat the bolter round aside. The



round exploded in the darkness off the right-hand side of the staircase.

The bolter fired again. Another slice of the blade, and the next round stung away to explode in the darkness to the left.

The Traitor Marine made to fire again. By whatever means the man was deflecting the shots, it was an astonishing trick, but it was not one he could keep repeating for a whole magazine of shells. Whatever his enhancements, strengths and gifts, the man was human, and he was limited by his humanity in ways that the Traitor Marine simply was not. The man was facing the apogee of martial technology, a fighting form developed and perfected ten thousand years ago and never improved upon. The Traitor Marine was a post-human being with weapons and armour beyond anything a man could hope to wield.

The Traitor Marine made to make his third shot. The man cried out. This time, he used his will on his enemy instead of on me.

He yelled, 'Stop!'

It didn't hold the Traitor Marine for very long – probably no more than a second or two – but it made the monster hesitate before firing again.

In the tiny window of opportunity that he had constructed for himself, the man leapt forwards, brought the old sword down in a vicious two-handed chop, and split the Traitor Marine's helmed head in two.

The man yanked the blade out. Blood and organic tissue sprayed out with it. The Traitor Marine stayed on his feet for a few moments. His beaked helm remained on his shoulders, but the two halves of it, severed down to the level of the chin and neck seal, knocked and ground against each other like two parts of a nutshell.

The Traitor Marine fell over backwards and collapsed down the staircase in a series of heavy, resonating impacts, falling like a hefty item of furniture. Eventually, about six metres down from the place where he had been killed, the Traitor Marine's body came to rest on the stairs, on its back, head towards the foot of the staircase. Black blood streamed out of his wounds and ran down the yellowed bone steps of the staircase like a peaty forest spring, or oil from an overturned can, cascading from one step to the next like a cataract.

His back to me, the man lowered his sword, and then slumped, one hand on the banister to support himself, as if entirely exhausted and spent.

I did not stop. I did not go back. I kept running. He had willed me to do so and, unable to argue, that's what I did.

I left him behind in the candlelit dark, and headed for the surface.

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## CHAPTER 29

*Which concerns an escape from imminent dangers*

The *cutros* worn by the saint-masked wardens of the basilica were broad, twin-edged swords about the length of a grown man's femur. The wardens had drawn them from their copper scabbards, ready. As I came out through the recessional under the high thrones, armed wardens were spreading out through the precinct and the space around the great altar to establish a cordon.

The disturbances below ground had been enough to set off alarms. Bells were ringing, some of them furiously, and garbled public broadcasts were issuing through the vast, distorting speaker network. Down the canyon of the altar processional, I could see a great disturbance moving through the vast assembled crowds of worshippers and pilgrims as they were urged to leave the building.

Nearer at hand, hundreds of clerics, scribes, rectors and other junior attendants of the basilica were hurrying out under the high thrones. There was a chatter of voices, of questions, and a distinct level of agitation. Smoke was wisping from the mouths and eyes of some of the great graven faces above us, and there was the unmistakable stink of psychomagic in the air. At least, I felt it was unmistakable. I could not believe that afterburn reek of psyker energy was not immediately detectable to all.

My pulse was racing. I was out of breath from my exertions, and dazed by the circumstances I had experienced. I left the recessional, brushed past some of the gathering wardens, and tried to slow down.

The man's will was leaving me now. I was my own person again. The compulsion he had planted in me to run, and *keep* running, was ebbing

away, but it left a residue behind, an impression in my mind of his. I kept seeing him. In the most vivid manner, I kept seeing the astonishing feats he had accomplished: *inhuman* feats. How does a man face down one of those beasts? Not just in terms of pitting his strength against one, utterly outmatched, but in terms of his resolve? How does a man overcome the hindbrain terror of confronting one of the Traitor Marines in full cry and stay planted in its path, let alone strike a blow?

And how does a man wield a sword, any sword, to cut one? To knock aside the unholy fury of bolter rounds?

Beyond the immediate terror of the moment, a greater, more existential terror filled me. What was he? What manner of creature had he been that he could even begin to do those things?

The opportunity for this reflection was fleeting. Several of the wardens grabbed at me, and tried to detain me. I do not know if it was simply that I was not dressed in the official robes of the Ecclesiarchy, like others thereabouts, or if my agitation and desire for flight had been very obvious, or even if they had been alerted to look for me. Several closed in around me, herding me with their force poles, or sheathing their *cutros* so they could take hold of my arms.

Not far away, below the choir boxes, I could see the parties of noble and aristocratic worshippers being escorted away by wardens. The wealthy and upstanding were being treated rather less roughly than me.

I pulled away.

‘Hold her!’ one of the wardens ordered. The gruff voice came from behind a placid painted face with a beatific smile.

I could not contend with them all, but I was not going to stay put. If nothing else, I had no wish to see what might follow me up out of the depths.

I cried out, ‘Oh help! Help me, I beg you!’ in a most timorous and exercised voice.

‘The Archenemy is come!’ I exclaimed, letting tears spring in my eyes. ‘He has burst up out of the ground under our feet, like the Pit Fiend himself, and he comes hither to devour us all! Run, I beg you. For your souls, run!’

My performance was enough. They shrank from me, just for a second, unsure as to whether I was raving or not. Other persons in the vicinity looked around, alarmed by the content of my exclamation. Some of the wealthy nobles reacted in alarm. I had caused a little flurry of confusion

around me.

They were not expecting me to move, thereupon, with great purpose. With the forced tears still wet upon my face, I turned and snatched a force pole from one of the wardens, and used it like a lever to pry his grip away from my arm. I then smacked it like a cane into the knuckles of another, thus freeing myself from the second-best grip upon me. A third lunged, his *cutro* out. I struck him firmly across the forearms, and the *cutro* flew into the air as he barked in pain. I caught the whirling sword by the grip as it came back down.

I started to run. Pole in one hand, *cutro* in the other, I ducked around two of the wardens, saw a gap and began to sprint. My legs were tired from the chase up the bone staircase, but I did not linger. The wardens, dismayed, gave chase with a great hue and cry. Twice I had turned the tables on their kind, once in the brass room, once above. The wardens were, essentially, ceremonial guards. Their combat training was neither rigorous nor precise, but they were soldiers, and they were armed. Now that I was clearly identified as a hostile party, rather than merely some person to detain, they would be appreciably more resolute.

I switched back, and then darted the length of the high altar processional, scattering a party of nobles. I burst through a straggle of choristers, who were too confused to get out of my way. The pursuing wardens ran after me, and one came to grief by colliding with two of the choristers. Two more wardens closed in ahead of me. I avoided one, and then found the other lunging full-tilt at me. He swung his force pole, which was active, and I managed to glance it aside with my borrowed *cutro*. I side-stepped, then shocked his leg out from under him with my own pole.

He fell heavily and awkwardly, and his saint mask skidded away across the polished floor on its nose. I leapt over him, and then swerved left towards one of the great outcrops of organ pipes that rose like black kolus trees against the side of the sacred ravine. More wardens rushed me, some with significant intent. I dodged past one, but was obliged to tackle the second. He threatened me with his drawn *cutro* in a manner that suggested he was intending to absolve his holy order of any accusation of incompetence by deftly eviscerating me.

I blocked, swung and reprised, turning his sharp blade away with mine three times. He countered with a loose swipe of his pole, which I ducked. Then I was forced back by two more hard sword strokes that I barely

parried.

I had not endured years of Mentor Saur's relentless training in the drill to be humbled in a sword match. The man was strong and determined, but, though his reach and power were both greater than mine, he was overconfident. The painted saint mask also restricted his peripheral vision.

I fainted to the side, then turned in as he over-extended a thrust past my left shoulder. I blocked his blade with my pole, stamped on an ankle, breaking it, and raked my *cutro* along his inner forearm, causing blood to spray. He went down. I jumped past him and pressed on.

The basilica was all of a commotion. I wasn't yet down the high altar processional, and the place was filling with armed wardens. Deafening instructions continued to boom, almost unintelligibly, from the speakers above, and echo around the vast dome. I had the vast floor space on my side, enabling me to dodge and tack and avoid, but it was not enough of an advantage.

Directly, fate provided me with another. Something ruptured deep below the ground, and made the whole of the basilica tremble. The floor shook. There was a deep, subterranean thump. The vast stained-glass windows shook, the forests of organ pipes shivered and rattled, and many small items such as hymnals, votive medals and psalters rained down from the sills of gallery boxes or fell from the reading ledges of pews. Loose pages fluttered down like dead leaves. A cry, the cry of a great mass of people lurching from alarm to open fear, rose like a pall of smoke into the space of the dome. The pilgrim crowd, still many thousands strong in the body of the church, began to flee with increased haste and decreased care. Panic swept through the place, as fast and fierce as fire across dry scrub.

Without delay, true fire followed. A bright gout of it, furious as the flames of ignited promethium, bellied up out of the recessional under the high thrones. The force of this outwash knocked those nearby down, and provoked others into frantic flight. Some of them ran with clothing or vestments ablaze. The flames belched out again, igniting fine draperies and the embroidered hangings that dressed the walls and doorways under the high thrones. Pennants caught fire and flourished sparks of burning fabric flew into the air. Some wooden seating and prayer stalls also caught fire and began to burn.

More flames, from some underground source, blew up into the open in the main circuit of the church, forced out of ventilation grilles and undercrofts

by a considerable pressure. A long row of banners, ancient standards that had been carried by the finest regiments of the Sancour Guard during the war, caught alight and torched off in a choking mass of orange flames and black smoke.

I smelled psychomagic again. I saw trceries of warp-fire dart around the upper reaches of the great dome like lightning, sizzling around metal handrails and flagpost caps. It made the micro-atmosphere of the immense dome turn sour and blacken like the sky on a day when autumn cedes into winter. Though I could not see his thought-form, I knew – I *felt* – that Grael Magent had come up from below. He had fought free of the brass reading room and the predations of the Traitor Marines ranged against him, and he had torn up from the underworld into the daylight, just as the progenitor of the Orphaeus myth had first done.

The light changed in the huge building's spacious interior. It curdled and darkened, not by the ministry of mist, or smoke, or dust, but by the staining of the air. Though daylight glowed beyond the huge windows of the dome clearly enough, night fell inside the building. Darkness encircled us, thick and redolent of fire, and of cinders and psykana devilment. Pure panic gripped the fleeing congregation.

I looked up. Winds that should not exist within a building tugged at my robes. In the darkness of the dome's inverted cup, I saw stars glimmering in a sky that I should not have been able to see, a sky that could not be.

The wardens, the benign expressions of their saintly masks making them look like simpletons in the face of the tumult, were no longer quite so intent upon pursuing me. I fled down the steps and out of the processional onto the main floor of the basilica.

Prayer drones buzzed around, lost and confused, holding up placard screens that no one wanted to read. The broad space was littered with objects dropped by the congregation in its haste to leave: prayer scrolls, data-slates, buttons, candles, charms, flowers, little volumes of praise and orders of service. Someone had lost a shoe. I also saw an overturned begging bowl and a walking cane, suggesting that some invalid seeking charity at the altar rail had miraculously found vitality restored to his limbs by the efficacy of fear and alarm.

I reached the great banks of pews. They were all but empty, aside from more discarded objects. My intention was to head towards the street doors to the rear of the main space. They were choked with crowds trying to press

out, but I reasoned that by the time I reached them, they would have cleared.

By the end of one of the pews, I saw a baby carriage. It was a fine thing, with a black lacquered body, wire wheels and a canvas sun-hood. In their panic to leave, someone had abandoned their child. I could hear it wailing in the perambulator. I faltered. Could I bring myself to leave it there, alone and helpless? The sight of an abandoned infant stirred inside me feelings that I had not realised were so deeply meshed into my heart.

I kept walking, briskly, determined that I could barely ensure my own fate, let alone be entrusted with the destiny of an innocent child, but the wailing voice had its hooks in me. I stopped, and turned back.

It was a mistake.

The baby carriage was empty. The wailing was coming from elsewhere, from high above. I listened carefully. I could hear it wasn't a baby at all.

I had turned back. I had wasted time I did not have.

One of Blackwards' men was prowling towards me. It was one of the professional bodyguards Balthus Blackwards had retained. The man had seen me and was closing. I could only presume that when the commotion had descended, Blackwards had despatched his people to recover the one asset he had: me.

He drew aside his black coat and I caught a flash of the silver body-mail he wore over his blue bodyglove. He drew a *segrule* from a scabbard under his left arm. It was a fine blade, not much longer than my *cutro*, but single-edged and with a slight curve-and-hook to it. The *segrule*, a smaller variant of the *salinter*, was an assassin's weapon. There was a curved silver knuckle-guard around the grip.

Did he want me dead, I wondered? Surely not. He was under precise instruction from Balthus Blackwards, and Blackwards saw me as property, a commodity. He would have ordered me to be recovered alive.

I wondered, on the other hand, how far the bodyguard might go to prevent me escaping: a slashed hamstring or heel? The removal of a limb?

The bodyguard advanced on me, gathering speed, his sword turned in a hold called the *ready rest*, which carried it out and to the side. I made ready to block with both weapons. I was sure from the very start that the man outmatched me in both technique and practice.

He came in close, tempting me to make the first blow. I kept backing away. Finally, when he was all but upon me, I flexed and jabbed at him with



my *cutro*.

He darted back with astonishing speed, and was in at me again before I realised it. I jabbed again, and swung the pole to follow it. He danced away from both, displaying more of that unnatural agility. Then he dodged in again.

I swung again, and jabbed, but he avoided both strikes. His *segrule* was still at *ready rest*. He had not even committed with his weapon. He was playing with me. He was so confident, he was leading with his body, unguarded. I thought of the silver-wire trceries in the flesh of his face and throat, and imagined the neural acceleration that such an inlay represented. He was fast because he was ingeniously augmented. He was confident because he was inhumanly fast.

He circled me, forcing me around. I now had my back to the altar. Again, he tilted at me, just a shoulder lead to alter his balance and make me react.

So I reacted. I swung the pole, and made it clumsy and graceless. Then I jabbed with the *cutro* as a follow-up, as I had done each time before. But as he dipped back out of my reach, I pressed in with surprising conviction instead of breaking, and struck again with the pole, this time making a much cleaner and finer job of it. The pole skimmed his left arm, not close enough to harm him, but close enough to make him reconsider the game he was playing. Immediately, he found himself obliged to step outside of the clean thrust I made with my *cutro*.

Suddenly, he was no longer amused by it all. I saw his grip stiffen. I didn't wait. I ploughed at him again, a three-form attack: a crosswise strike with the pole, a stab with the blade, then a blow-and-parry with the pole. His action, which had begun, I'm sure, as a sleek drive with the *segrule* that was supposed to wound me and clip my wings with one stroke, just to emphasise his mastery of sword combat, became a hasty rattle of parries as he fended me off. His *segrule* crackled against my pole, then drew flint-spark flashes off my *cutro*.

He became annoyed. He switched hands – another sure sign of a swordsman showing off – and rained three blows at me. I blocked the first two with sword and pole, and then out-stepped the third. He was no longer following a pattern of bout-and-circle. There would be no rest or consideration between each exchange. He struck four more times, stepping into me to part my defence. I parried the first with my *cutro*, dodged the second, parried again to throw back the third, then lurched back inelegantly

to avoid the fourth. I almost out-placed myself. Mentor Saur always taught us that sword fights were won or lost on footwork, and it was too easy to mis-step when reacting instinctively. My backwards lurch had saved me from one blow, but it had left my feet inadequately placed to turn away from the follow-up. Mentor Saur had forever reminded us that swordplay was like regicide. One had to read the moves ahead, beyond the current action. It was not an adversary's current attack that would kill us, but our inability to respond to his next.

My feet would not move me far enough. I had bunched my placing and ended with my weight on the wrong leg. As the bodyguard slipped the *segrule* in to take advantage of this mistake, I had no choice. I switched my left guard up, and bashed his blade away with the force pole.

It saved me, but I was obliged to sacrifice the pole. To effect the block, I had been forced to take a more perilous grip on the pole, and the parry had torn it from my hand.

It clattered, fizzling, onto the flagstones.

Immediately, I switched to a side-on guard, leading with my *cutro*. Reduced to one weapon, I was undeniably outclassed.

He saw it and made a stamping attack, which I defended. He crossed, and then tore the sleeve off my robe with a pass, although I evaded hard enough to avoid actual harm. I stepped to the rear, my empty hand in the small of my back, my spine arched backwards to clear his scything blade. I immediately lunged at him, hoping to exploit the exposure of his extension, but he was too quick. His boosted nerves lit up and turned him in an impossible pirouette, a rotation that took him out of my *cutro*'s path and back on the attack. I blocked, blocked again, parried, and then found myself rammed into the end of one of the pews.

Without warning, he broke off. I blinked, trying to work out where he had gone. The bodyguard was suddenly fighting someone else, a man who had attacked from nowhere as we had been duelling, and whose appearance had forced the bodyguard to break off and defend himself.

I did not know who this new man was. I had never seen him before. I was grateful for the respite from harm, but I was beginning to find it most unnerving that strangers kept interceding on my behalf.

The man was big and very well muscled. He wore a heavy brown bodyglove. His head was shaved bald except for a grizzled goatee. There were old scars on his scalp and face, echoes of a life spent at war. His

expression was curiously dead-eyed. He was not driven by anything, I felt, other than a need to win his fight. It was the weariness of the old warrior, hardened to all blood and effort, recognising that he must fight again in order to prevail. There was no hunger in it, no glee of battle, no satisfaction in skill at arms. Driving this bodyguard from me was a task, a necessity, and he was supremely skilled at it.

He lacked the bodyguard's speed. His neural pathways were not enhanced in any way. What he had was a true, practical brilliance with the blade, a natural talent that had been honed over the period of a long lifetime in actual combat rather than a swordmaster's drill hall.

He was wielding a hanger with a heavy, straight blade, and carried a main gauche to drive off the bodyguard's much more rapid counter-strikes.

I began to back away. It was an opportunity to run.

The newcomer saw me edging aside.

'Don't you dare!' he yelled at me, grunting with the effort of a blow traded. 'Take a seat. Wait. Don't go anywhere.'

I was not especially disposed to obey this order. In issuing it, he had taken his eye off the bodyguard. Blackwards' man ripped in, and put a cut across his opponent's ribs, to the left. Blood welled out of the slashed bodyglove. If he hadn't turned, the *segrule* would have impaled him through the heart.

This annoyed my protector enormously. He called the bodyguard some words that I would choose not to repeat in this record. I think, in that moment, the bodyguard realised that he had made the most awful mistake in enraging the newcomer. He had woken something up, something best left slumbering. He had thrown pain into the mix, and pain was a spur. The world-weary old veteran, dogged and determined, was suddenly spiked out of his slow-burn professionalism by the goad of a wound. He lost his composure, and became aggravated by the nimble, enhanced killer dancing around him.

He rammed the main gauche into the bodyguard's chest, right under the sternum, and lifted him off the ground on it, like a fish on a hook. The bodyguard opened and closed his mouth rapidly, in utter surprise. His eyes widened. He dropped his sword. Still holding his victim off the ground on his knife, the newcomer severed his neck with a single cross-blow of his hanger.

Then he let the body fall off his knife. Blood jetted from the stump and gurgled from the gut wound, quickly forming an almighty pond on the floor

around my protector's feet. The bodyguard's head lay on one cheek a surprising distance away in a small pool of its own.

My protector looked at me.

'You need to come with me, young lady,' he said.

'Do I now?' I replied.

'Throne,' he murmured. 'When you pull that face, that twitch of the lip, you're just like her.'

'Who are you?' I asked.

'My name's...' he stopped. 'What does it matter what my name is? You're to come with me.'

'You've saved me from that sell-sword, for which I am grateful,' I replied, 'but I hardly see the incentive to do as you say. You just proved yourself quite ready to behead a person.'

'For Throne's sake,' he snapped, dabbing at the gash in his side. 'Shut up and come with me.'

'I have no idea who you are,' I said.

'I'm Nayl,' he said. 'Nayl. I'm a friend to you right now, if you stop disobliging me, that is.'

'I have other friends, Mr Nayl,' I said.

'Not here you don't,' he said. 'What was that accent? Thuva? Loki?'

'I have other enemies too,' I added.

'Not here you—' he began to say, then saw the look in my eyes. He sighed, cursed most terribly again, and turned. Two of the other bodyguards had appeared, the female and another of the males, and they were coming right for him, blades drawn.

'Dammit all!' cried the man called Nayl, and engaged them both. He was suddenly very occupied indeed. I wondered if I should help him.

'Beta!' a voice rang out. I turned, and saw Lightburn at the back of the pews. He gestured to me to join him urgently. I felt, on balance, that I had a great deal more reason to trust Lightburn than I did the mysterious Mr Nayl. I ran towards the Curst, and heard Nayl call out in fury as he realised I was leaving him to fight it out with Blackwards' men.

Lightburn grabbed me by the arm, and we ran towards the back of the basilica. Blackness filled the dome, and the stars that peeked out of it were not stars I recognised, or ever wanted to visit. They were discoloured and bloodshot, as if from a diseased stretch of space somewhere. The smell of psychomagic was still strong.

‘Where’s Judika?’ I asked.

‘Somewhere,’ he answered.

‘That answer is not enough, Curst!’ I said.

‘He was above, in the upper walks,’ Lightburn replied, looking this way and that for signs of pursuit, ‘but I have lost track of him. He said he was providing a diversion.’

‘This is not his diversion,’ I snapped.

‘Indeed, I had not taken it to be so,’ he agreed. He regarded the monstrous turmoil of the space above us with revulsion. ‘I have not seen him, not since we last parted company,’ he continued. ‘I do not know what has become of him in this madness.’

He looked at me.

‘What has happened here?’ he asked me plainly. ‘What have you seen? What was done?’

‘I cannot say,’ I replied. ‘Not now. Perhaps when we have got clear of here, and I have had time to reflect upon all that I have seen, and make sense of it.’

I returned his gaze. There was a look in his hooded, anxious eyes that made me feel he was the only person in the whole of the Emperor’s Imperium who actually cared for me *for myself* rather than as some trinket or desired commodity.

‘I have seen things today, Renner,’ I said, with an emotion that surprised me. I had a break in my voice. ‘I have seen such things as I never thought to see, and other things that no person should comfortably look upon. I have unsettled myself.’

‘I think you are in shock,’ he ventured.

‘I suppose I probably am,’ I replied. ‘Now, tell me please, did you and Jude concoct any sort of plan for this escape or is it entirely an improvisation?’

‘There is a plan,’ he said. ‘Of sorts,’ he added with less confidence. ‘Your friend Judika hatched it, but not without the help of that wastrel Shadrake. For such a disagreeable man, he has his talents.’

‘Did Judika go to the church elders, as I told you?’ I asked.

‘I have not seen him!’ he repeated. ‘I have not seen him to pass on your suggestion.’

He was right. He had told me this already. My mind was in a fuddled state of disarray.

‘We will go to the west,’ he said, grasping my hand and running with me along a golden colonnade under one of the grand, banked choir theatres. ‘There are two exits to the street where the crowds may be lighter, and, if not, a side passage behind the crypt of Saint Eilona.’

‘How do you know such details?’ I asked.

‘I know the place,’ he grunted.

‘How?’

‘I worked here once,’ he said. It was a strange and reluctant confession that he seemed to regret the moment it was out of him. I had no time to seize upon it and question him further.

He left the colonnade and ran down a stone well of stairs that allowed the public and the faithful access to the lower crypts. Stragglers and the infirm lingered here, making heavy weather of their exit from the basilica. They limped and shuffled, physically unsteady or in a state of consternation. Some cried out at the scene around them and chastised themselves.

We pushed through, and Lightburn shoved some of the malingerers out of our path. The steps were scattered with discarded flower garlands, prayer mats, votive coins and fluttering orders of service. Some of the civilians we shouldered past cursed at us and struck at us with their hands or with such items as they were carrying.

Near the foot of the stairs, where the well opened out into a broad, flagged landing and the walls were hung with the graven copper plaques of saints and deeds, all festooned like hanging baskets with posted offerings or flowers and ribbons, two of the masked temple wardens appeared, spotted us, and pushed through the throng to reach us.

I readied my *cutro*. Lightburn did not break stride or try to turn us back. He strode down the steps to meet them, pushing people out of the way, and then began to berate them in a language I did not understand.

Instead of attacking, they recoiled from him, and made off in the direction they had come.

He looked back, grabbed my hand again and pulled me onwards.

‘What was that?’ I asked him.

‘I told them that the true quarry was heading for the north chancel.’

‘In what way did you tell them?’ I asked.

‘It doesn’t bloody matter!’ he barked.

I had to think that it did not, but I presumed he had spoken to them, fluently, in *Omnes*, the cant or dialect of the temple, a private trade tongue

that the juniors of the church use to keep the business of their office in confidence from the public. He spoke it well, and with the authority of use. My Curst man had been a warden once, I fancied.

Three more of the painted masks appeared, and he ordered them away too, pointing and making an emphatic show. We were almost at the mouth of the stone porch in the west end of the great building. By my memory, Pediment Street lay just beyond.

‘He has a car waiting,’ Lightburn growled.

‘A car?’

‘A motor carriage that has been arranged for him by a friend,’ he said.

‘Do you mean Shadrake?’

‘Yes, yes! Him!’

‘And what friends does he have?’ I asked.

‘A what-do-you-call-it... a patron,’ he answered. ‘Someone who likes those damned pictures he makes. He has called in favours and old debts to help us.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘I think he likes you,’ Lightburn said. He hesitated. ‘I think he likes me too,’ he added, with some reluctance.

The porch was ahead of us. We ran on, full pelt, seeing daylight beyond the arch, heaving the rumble of daemonic thunder behind us.

A figure loomed against the light, advancing to meet us. He was a silhouette, but I knew him at once. It was the man from the stairs, the half-crippled man with the sword who had performed such feats upon the bone staircase.

We skidded to a halt in the stone box of the vast porch, facing him. He had his sword drawn and was glaring at us, as if his patience was worn out and he had expended more strength than necessary locating me and blocking my escape.

‘Thorn wishes Gauntlet,’ I heard him mutter into a vox-bead mic, ‘by hallowed path diverted.’

He took a step forwards, still staring at me. I sensed that Lightburn was ready to attack, thinking him just a man. I knew how futile such an attack would be, and how swiftly the Curst would regret it and die. There was no time to warn him. I willed Renner not to act.

Then I thought of willpower, and knew that the man was very probably about to unleash his undeniable will upon me again, and oblige me to do

whatever he said.

His mouth began to open, a command forming.

I twisted my cuff to *dead*.

The words failed in the man's mouth. Struck dumb for an instant, his powerful mind blanked, he staggered in surprise.

In that moment, Lightburn pulled out his massive revolver, and fired, without hesitation, the heavy-gauge breaching round in the centre-pin chamber of its cylinder.

The boom rang around the roofed compartment of the porch, as loud as doomsday. The shot hit the big man's centre mass squarely, and smashed him off his feet. He flailed backwards for several metres and landed very hard, flat on his back.

The Curst and I leapt past his body and ran into the daylight.

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*The third section of the story,  
which is called*

## FEVERFUGUE

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# CHAPTER 30

## *Beyond Wastewater*

The daylight was fierce. A strong, bland sun burned down on Pediment Street out of a white sky. The light made me squint.

The sky was not empty. Huge columns of filthy brown smoke were issuing from the vast basilica behind us, besmirching the sky and creating a heavy, foggy pall across the southern part of Queen Mab. Where the estuary wind came in off the marshlands and stirred it, the smoke twisted like ooze, and seemed, now and then, to form frightening faces that leered down at the city below.

The street, a broad thoroughfare, and the ones adjoining it, were all of a confusion. Citizens flooding in panic out of the great Ecclesiarchy building had mingled with crowds gathering to witness the spectacle. There was a great noise, and a great fear. People were shouting, bells were ringing and officers of the watch were caught in the human tide, helpless as driftwood.

We looked around for Judika, but there was no sign of him, nor any hope – so I calculated – of achieving such a goal. The Curst kept us moving towards some destination he had in mind, and our path was made rather freer by the fact that my blank aura was causing people to shy away from us without knowing why.

Lightburn didn't seem to be bothered by it. The burdener had a rather admirable knack of taking everything in his stride.

All around us, people were jabbering like lunatics.

There was a little yard on the south side of Pediment Street where vehicles could draw up to deliver to the alms houses. There were several motor carriages there, most of them cargo vehicles, but one was a handsome motor

landau with a servitor driver.

As we approached, the side door of the painted carriage opened, and I saw Lucrea. She waved at us, beckoning frantically with her dye-stained hands.

‘Padua! Padua! Come!’ she cried.

We ran to the vehicle. I switched my cuff back. I didn’t want my presence to alarm Lucrea. She was quite highly strung.

Constant Shadrake, unshaven and wolfish, was in the carriage with her.

‘There’s my girl!’ he exclaimed, taking a lho-stick out of his mouth to talk.

‘Where’s Judika?’ I asked him.

‘Who?’ he replied, with an idle frown.

‘The handsome boy,’ Lucrea scolded. ‘Padua’s friend.’

‘Oh, him,’ said Shadrake, uncaring. ‘He went off. Now, my dears, there’s too much commotion here. We must be gone.’

‘We must wait for him,’ I said.

Shadrake looked at me.

‘We came here for you, my sweet thing,’ he said. ‘It is not safe here. It is time to leave. My dear, after such an effort to rescue you, we will not lose you again.’

I glanced at Lightburn.

‘He says you found me with your glass,’ I said to Shadrake. ‘That was very clever of you.’

He shrugged a self-conscious ‘it was nothing’ shrug.

I held out my hand. Shadrake looked slightly put out.

‘Your sighting glass,’ I said.

He handed it out of the carriage to me with a tut.

I took it. I think it was the first time I had actually held it. I was surprised by the weight of it. I raised it, and looked towards the basilica.

It was an unbalancing feeling. Light seemed to squirm inside the old glass, making my stomach flip. I saw the world, but it was distorted. Angles were flexed and lines were bent. Dimensions and proportions were not reliable, and neither were colours. Everything was tinted by an unnatural cast, and the very sunlight was stained. I saw strange radiances and auras, especially in the smoke rising from the stricken monument, which, through the glass, was especially disturbing to behold.

The vision made me feel woozy, but I persisted with it. I was sure that the glass, a curious object if ever one existed, was somehow able to image and interpret the shadows, ripples and currents of the empyrean, which rolls like

an ocean just outside our mortal universe, or so the Secretary always taught us. Shadrake would have perceived me, because, as a pariah, I would have been a hard, unyielding blot in that fluctuating sea.

Judika surely would be too.

I spotted him before I'd even realised it. I was distracted by a glimmer of light that reminded me of Grael Magent's awful, bloodshot luminosity. As I turned to look at it, it vanished, but my change of angle revealed a small, yet very solid, form indeed.

Judika was on the far side of the street, beside one of the basilica's entrances. He was pressed against the wall in the shadow of the door, huddled as though he was hurt. People fleeing the temple floor rushed past him without sparing him a second glance.

I handed the glass back to Shadrake, and set off at once, dodging and weaving my way across the teeming street.

'Hey!' Shadrake yelled after me. Lightburn, with a sigh, set off at my side. He had seen where I had been looking, and had spotted Judika too.

It took a while to get to Judika. When we finally walked up to him, he didn't seem to recognise me at first. He was shaking, as though he was very cold, and his skin was blotchy and pale. Sweat sheened him, and soaked his clothes. He was clutching himself, his arms around his torso, as though his ribs were broken or he had taken a wound in the side.

'Judika?'

I had to say his name three times before he looked at me.

'Beta?'

'We're leaving now, Jude. Shadrake's waiting. We can go.'

He nodded, still shaking. The nod provoked a cough, and he was wracked by a grating, painful bout of coughing for a moment. I touched him to support him. His skin was clammy and far too cold.

'What happened to you?' I asked.

He coughed again. The cough was rasping and dry. There was a prickling edge to it that sounded painful.

'I went in to find you,' he said. Each word was a struggle. 'Some horror was unleashed. I ran, but it has left its mark upon me.'

'Where?'

He shook his head, coughing again.

'Through my spirit,' he said. 'I think I will recover, but it has drained me for now.'

‘Help me get him to the carriage,’ I said to the Curst. Lightburn nodded.

We half-carried Judika back to the motor carriage. Shadrake seemed almost disappointed to see him. We got inside the compartment – Judika, Shadrake, Lucrea, Lightburn and myself – and Shadrake ordered the servitor to move off. The motor carriage, drive plant rattling, edged out of the yard and began to creep through the traffic south along Pediment Street. Many people were fleeing that way, on foot or in vehicles. Shadrake pulled on the cord that governed our vehicle’s horn in an attempt to clear a path for us.

I helped Judika settle in a corner seat against the frame of one of the windows. The carriage was well appointed, with rich red velvet upholstery and gold fringes. The compartment ceiling had been painted to show a trompe l’œil sky of clouds and playful cherubs. There were vermeil gas lamp sconces on the wall.

It was a fine carriage.

‘Whose coat of arms is that?’ I asked, pointing to the door.

It took over an hour to clear the hubbub around the basilica quarter and move south into the districts east of Toilgate. In shabbier, less busy streets, the carriage was able to make better time along the cobbles.

The cones of smoke from the basilica rose like some grim premonition behind us, obscuring even the mountains in the west.

Woadhouses, which was the name by which this district was known, had originally been the land above the marshes where early settlers had cleared the timber and raised the first villages that had grown into Queen Mab. It was not a salubrious quarter. The habs were no longer made of wood, but they were dreary and bulk-rise, and had been unimproved and left to decay. Water damage stained rockcrete walls and plastered shingles. Tiles were patched and incomplete. Pavements and patches of waste ground were overgrown and cluttered with rusting refuse. I knew I was closer than I had been in many years to the marshes of my birth, but if this proximity was anything to go by, I had little wish to explore further.

People had come out of their habs all along Woadhouses Row to observe the distant smoke and commotion. They were of poor, rough stock, and eyed our passing carriage warily.

We passed forlorn zones of industrialisation, many parts of which were foreclosed and abandoned. Commercial premises were shut up and boarded,

and store sheds looked empty and forgotten. We began to see the flat, grey mirrors of Wastewater, the vast network of overflow reservoirs that surrounded Woadhouses, tanking water from the marshes as a reserve for the city. They were like small seas, or lakes contained by dykes in low country. They were dismal in the flat light, their surfaces shivered by winds. A few habs, sheds and pylons marked the edges of the rockcrete beds. Our road ran through the landscape on an embankment. This lowly, dank part of Queen Mab felt stagnant and decayed, as though the sapping, undermining ministry of water beneath the waterlogged ground was slowly washing the life from it.

As dusk settled, we found ourselves heading along a metalled track around the rim of Wastewater's darkest and most mysterious pool, a vast mere of silted water, towards a grim, black range of trees. This, Shadrake told me, was the last surviving part of the original woodland that had stood before the rise of Queen Mab.

Through the long and increasingly depressing journey, we had sat quietly in the jolting carriage. I was rather too stunned and exhausted by the day's events to frame proper questions about our destination or purpose, and Shadrake was evasive. He opened several bottles of amasec, and lit numerous lho-sticks, with the chatting, giggling Lucrea as his partner in revels. He told me that the coat of arms was the crest of his patron family, and that they had lent him the car as a favour, and that we were running to their estate as a place to lie low, out of the way. When I asked him why they were being so helpful, he told me that they owed him a consideration or two, and he had promised them a painting of me. They trusted his judgement in the quality of models. Their name, Shadrake said, was Quatorze. They were old blood. I would like them.

I had not heard of them.

He refused to be drawn further, and acted as if it was all an exciting surprise to come. He drank. Lucrea laughed and played the viol to accompany some silly songs. Lightburn sat in grudging silence, and accepted a few pulls on the bottle of amasec.

Judika sat at the window, huddled under a coat, shivering still and gazing out at the black, bleak water sliding by outside.

Every now and then he coughed. I could tell he was ill. It was a dry cough and each bark was accompanied by a crackle like vox static.

Shadrake tried to change the subject by asking me what had happened in

the basilica. I offered little. I sat back, exhausted, and let the rocking of the carriage lull me.

When I woke, the carriage had turned its lamps on and was rattling down a long lane of black mire under a tunnel of ancient trees. The trees seemed to be covered in shadows rather than leaves. In a clearing ahead, also canopied by dark and venerable trees, lay a house, a stone pile of considerable size.

‘Aha,’ said Shadrake, by now drunk as a lord. ‘Here we are. Feverfugue.’

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# CHAPTER 31

*Which concerns the home of the Quatorze*

The house was called Feverfugue. This I was told, not shown. There was no sign of a nameplate on the black iron gate or the peeling front doors.

It was a place of some scale, with several wings. The main bulk was built of a blue-grey stone not local to the prefecture of Hercula. The stone looked wet, as though the climate had sheened it with slime. Either that, or it naturally glistened like snakeskin. The roof was low-gabled and composed of black tiles that resembled the scales of a larger reptile. It was not in good repair. Moss clad stretches of the roof, and hung from some of the limp gutters. The windows were lightless and dull in frames that had rotted in the marsh air. On all sides, the lawns were overgrown to weeds, and the trees imposed, blocking out the light with their black shapes, drawing themselves halfway across the aspect of the house like a fan across a demure face. Feverfugue had been built in the old woods, but the woods had already begun to reclaim it.

When we arrived, in an evening that was creeping down around the small lights of our carriage like a fog, it appeared that only one person lived in the whole of the place. Shadrake had spoken of the Quatorze as a ‘they’, as a ‘family’, as ‘patrons’, but it was quickly revealed that he had simply been referring to their past. They were ‘they’ in as much as they were old blood, a noble lineage, but ‘they’ were simply Alace Quatorze, the last of the line.

She had servants and servitors to attend her, and run the house of Feverfugue, but she was a solitary being. She had been beautiful, and was still, I suppose, but she was very old. Juvenat treatments had preserved her. She was like a priceless antique: in perfect condition, but rare and delicate.



Her servants, all dressed in livery as blue-grey as the snakeskin stones of the place, brought us from the carriage into a hall lighted with many tapers and candelabra. The gloom was rendered golden, though there was a quality to the marshland light, evening at nightfall, that made everything appear as if it had been washed out or diluted by the excess water in the region.

The staff were dour and unspeaking. We had no luggage. We were brought into a sitting room where a small and meagre fire had been grudgingly lit in a vast and ornate grate. More candles shone on us. Judika was helped into an armchair, and the servants went off, at Shadrake's command, to fetch some food and something to drink.

Though grand, the room smelled of damp and coal tar. Like the hall we had passed through, the place was in a state of elegant decay. The carpets and rugs were faded and worn, and there were water stains coming through the once-polished floorboards. On the walls and ceiling, dark patches loomed beneath the pale plasterwork, like the shadows of submarine beasts passing close to the surface. All the furniture, though of good quality, was old and threadbare, with every joint and spell in need of gluing and knocking in.

I was worried about Judika. His cough was getting worse and he showed no signs of improvement. I had begun to realise that the scratchy quality to his recurring cough reminded me of the same catch in the Secretary's throat. It seemed odd. The Secretary's cough had been an affectation. Judika's was the result of an illness or injury. I wanted to examine him, but he would not allow it. He was evidently suffering from some signal pain in his torso.

Lightburn paced. Lucrea sat down on a couch and snoozed. Shadrake finished his last bottle of amasec and started talking inanely as he waited for fresh supplies.

The servants were taking a long time. I went to the door and looked back into the hall. Though I was glad to be free of the clutches of the Blackwards, the Ecclesiarchy and whomever else, I was not comfortable in this retreat. It smelled wrong.

Lucrea appeared at my side, yawning, and rubbing her eyes.

'Is there food yet, Pad?' she asked.

'No,' I replied. 'Have you been here before?'

She shook her head.

'Only Shadrake comes here,' she said. 'This is an honour for us.'

'I do not know who the Quatorze are,' I said. 'I thought I knew all the

families and lines of Queen Mab.'

'Padua!' she cried with a laugh. 'How could you possibly know *all* of them? No one could know all of them!'

I corrected myself. An unguarded slip.

'I mean,' I said, 'I have not heard of them ever, not even from Shadrake.'

'He's known them for ages,' Lucrea replied. 'They like his work. His eye.' *Or what his glass shows his eye*, I thought.

'They do not think enough of him to hang his work, I see,' I said.

She shook her head.

'They have a special room for that,' she told me. 'Shadrake said so.'

I looked up at the family crest. The coat-of-arms motif appeared in the hall too, on several plaster shields and heraldic *stemme* made of gesso.

'I do not know the arms,' I said. 'Nor do they seem to relate to any other arms of the city. Usually, one crest will show elements of another, to reveal how dynasties have mixed by marriage and accord.'

She sniffed and looked at the nearest crest herself.

'I don't know,' she said, and did not seem to care.

Then, as an afterthought, she added, 'But I do know that's been repainted.'

'The crest?'

'All of them. You can tell by the colour and intensity of the blues and reds that have been layered on later. It was done some time ago, years I'd guess, but the design is not as old as the rest of the decoration.'

'Someone has re-worked the crest?' I asked.

She nodded.

'And you'd be sure of that?'

She grinned. Of course she was. She'd spent many of her few years in the pigment shops of the commune on Lycans Street. It was the one thing she had studied and worked at. Her stained fingers attested to her knowledge. She knew about paint: how it mixed, how it dried, how it wore and how it aged.

We went back into the room. Lucrea moved to warm herself at the ailing grate. Lightburn came to me and hissed, 'I have a nasty sense of this place. I think that, as soon as it is light out, we should go.'

'I think so too,' I replied. 'Shadrake won't like it. And we must find a way to take Judika.'

He nodded. He still had his burden to deliver me safe to Mam Mordaunt, wherever she was, and, though that plan had been badly derailed, he was

intent on completing it.

The servants suddenly returned with silver trays of food and drink. With them came Alace Quatorze.

It was our first sight of her.

She was of medium height for a woman, and had a slender build, which made her seem taller. Her black hair, too black for her bone age, was very short, like a boy's. She was evidently ancient, but there was not a line upon her white skin. Her eyes were large and dark, like a cat's. As I said, she was very beautiful, but she was not beautiful the way a woman is usually beautiful. She was beautiful like a star is beautiful, like a carnodon, like an ocean in a storm.

She wore a long, straight white dress, which was very elegant, and looked as though she had been on her way to a great society ball when we arrived and forced her to change her plans.

'Constant,' she said. Her voice was like a woodland breeze.

'My dear,' he replied, bowing and fawning.

'You've brought friends,' she said.

'With your permission,' he said. 'As I explained, there was some difficulty. Your help has been most appreciated. The use of your carriage, and allowing us to be guests here—'

'We get very few visitors to Feverfugue,' she said. 'The climate does not agree with many. They find it dismal. But it can be a good place to hide, down here beyond Wastewater.'

She looked at Lucrea, who was standing in Shadrake's shadow with her head humbly bowed.

'Is this the girl?' Alace Quatorze asked.

'No, no!' Shadrake laughed. He gestured towards me. 'That is her. Padua.'

Alace Quatorze turned and regarded me with her extraordinary eyes.

'Of course,' she said. 'I should have seen it. She is very lovely. Hello, Padua.'

'Mamzel,' I replied.

She came over to me.

'Constant has told me very much about you,' she said, 'and I can see why. He finds you a most excellent and inspiring subject for his work. He has great skill, but only the very finest models bring out the best in his hand and eye.'

I did not know what to say.

‘He tells me you are a pariah,’ she said.

I started.

She quickly raised a soothing hand.

‘Now, now, no need to be alarmed,’ she said. ‘I know it’s a secret, but Shadrake has an eye for such things.’

‘A glass, rather,’ I said.

‘A glass indeed,’ Alace Quatorze said. ‘One that I gave him years ago, when he was a struggling artist whose potential was recognised by me and me alone.’

‘Did you see that through the glass too?’ I asked, perhaps snidely. She laughed, as if this was an entirely legitimate suggestion.

‘I did! I did!’ she admitted. ‘I saw him through it, and knew that he could do more good with it than me. He has painted for my delight ever since. I have several of his pieces, all commissions. You should see them.’

‘I should like to,’ I lied.

‘But of your state,’ she said, more serious and interested again. ‘I imagine you are limited?’

‘I am.’

‘How? A bracelet? A necklace? An implant?’

‘A cuff,’ I said. I hesitated, then raised my wrist to show her.

She nodded, fascinated.

‘You know a lot about... my kind,’ I said.

‘I have made a study,’ she said. ‘The subject interests me. It’s really only an amateur interest, but I’ve always wanted to meet one.’

‘There’s not a lot of material on the subject of... my kind,’ I said, ‘that is freely or publicly available. It is, for the most part, sequestered or restricted. Beings such as me do not officially exist.’

‘The rarest of all rare things.’ She smiled. ‘And to have two in one room.’

Again, I was startled by her perception. She was looking at Judika, huddled and forlorn in the chair. He barely noticed that eyes had turned to him.

‘I spotted his cuff too. You are friends. You came, perhaps, from the same school?’

‘School?’ I echoed.

Alace Quatorze smiled.

‘I know the school, Padua. Just as I know that Padua isn’t your real name. I know of the Maze Undue, my dear, and I know that it fell most tragically

just a few nights ago, after a very long existence as a secret educator of the most special souls of all.'

'Have you been there?' I asked.

'Never,' she said, 'but I have long been aware of it. I make it my business to know about this city. It was a resource I intended to use, and never got the chance to. Now it is gone, thanks to the brutal enemies of true mankind, but I have, perhaps as some small consolation, rescued two of its lost souls.'

'And what do you want in return for that rescue?' I asked.

'Nothing,' she smiled, 'or nothing much. I want to help mend your sick friend, who has been wounded by psychomagic.'

'You know this?'

'I have seen the effect before. I also want Constant to paint you.'

'Paint me?'

'Yes, here, at Feverfugue. I have supplies prepared. I want him to paint you for me. Paint you with your limiter off.'

'Why?'

'Because it would delight me to own so singular a work.'

'And what else?' I asked.

She shook her head.

'Nothing else. Nothing. I want nothing else from you. If you choose to tell me your names, I will be honoured, but we can make do with pretend if you care not to. I would also very much like you to turn your limiter off for a moment, but whether you do so or not is up to you.'

I looked at her. There was nothing but friendship and openness in her large, remarkable eyes. Then I realised that there was perhaps simply nothing there at all.

'Who do you work for?' I asked.

'Work for, my dear?'

'Who do you represent?'

'No one. Just my own family interests.'

'Your family has changed its name and its arms, hasn't it?' I asked. 'You have not always been Quatorze.'

'We have not. I am the last of a much older line. My blood comes from off-world, and is intermixed with history. So much so, that it became prudent a while ago to change our identity to prevent... trouble from following us.'

'You say "us",' I said, 'but there is only you, isn't there?'

She nodded. 'I am the last.'

'I will turn off my cuff for you,' I said, 'if you agree to tell me your family's real name.'

She thought for a moment, smiled, and said, 'I see no reason that can't be agreeable to both of us.'

I held her look for a moment. Then I set my cuff to *dead* without ceremony. Judika did not react. Shadrake and Lightburn both took an uneasy step back. Lucrea recoiled in involuntary surprise.

'Padua!' she gasped. I could see her fear, how I suddenly repelled her.

Alice Quatorze simply smiled. She did not move back from me.

'How delicious,' she said. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. 'It is so wonderful when it all goes quiet,' she said.

I turned my cuff back on. She opened her eyes and looked at me.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Now your turn,' I replied.

'Very well,' she said. 'Who do you think we are, Padua? You seem to have some suspicion and I would like to see if it is correct.'

'Is your family's real name... Chase?' I asked. 'Are you Lilean Chase?'

She looked genuinely surprised.

'No, no!' she laughed. 'I am not her. You have made a mistake.'

'Then who are you?'

She looked into my eyes again.

'My family name is Glaw,' she said.

I was disappointed. I had never heard the name before.

# CHAPTER 32

## *Teke the Smiling One*

Alace Quatorze invited us to join her in the dining room, where a meal was to be served. When it became plain that Judika was too sick to be moved, we made him comfortable on a couch with a rug over him.

‘I’ll have a bed chamber prepared for him,’ said Alace Quatorze.

‘He needs more than a bed,’ scoffed Renner Lightburn.

Alace Quatorze looked at him sharply.

‘You’re right, sir,’ she told him, relaxing slightly. I think she had baulked at insolence from such a common man. She told her servants to keep the meal hot but delay serving it.

‘I need to know what happened to him,’ she said.

‘I don’t know what happened to him,’ I replied.

‘Then tell me what you do know,’ she said.

I did so. I did so carefully, selectively. I explained that I had been taken by the agents of the Blackwards family while on the run. I said that they saw me as some kind of mercantile asset.

‘They see everything that way,’ Alace Quatorze replied. ‘Oh, the Blackwards. They are an old family, perhaps the oldest of all. The oldest in the sector, certainly. What is the name of the young, arrogant wretch who now heads the line?’

‘Balthus?’ I suggested.

She nodded. ‘I have no time for him. For the last eight centuries, our bloodlines have co-existed in the Helican Region. The Blackwards always excelled in service. They were providers and procurers, and could obtain the most extraordinary objects and items.’

She looked at me with her remarkable eyes.

‘I am not surprised they placed a significant value on you, my dear.’

I shrugged.

‘Back in the day,’ she continued, ‘the Blackwards served my family very well indeed.’

‘You mean the Glaws?’ I asked.

‘Yes. The Blackwards could always be relied upon to provide whatever my ancestors required, and deliver it anywhere in the three subs. But their attitude has changed. They no longer seem to be content to serve, nor content with a magnificent reputation for service. They want direct power for themselves, rather than indirect influence. They are developing the family business. I think it was when we first saw signs of this ambition that my family began to reduce the amount of business we did with the emporium.’

‘What sort of influence do they want?’ I asked.

‘There is only one kind, Padua,’ she replied.

She poured a glass of water from a crystal decanter on a side table and sipped.

‘Go on,’ she said to me.

I eyed my audience: Renner, by the fire, watching the flames and listening; Shadrake, drinking from a goblet and sketching me while I talked; Lucrea curled up on the settee beside him; Judika dead to the world.

I told her that Balthus Blackwards had brought me to the church with, as I saw it, the intention of selling me to the Ecclesiarchy. I did not tell them about the commonplace book of Lilean Chase, which I knew Lightburn still carried in his coat for me, nor did I mention the Ordos or the Cognitae. But I did, out of curiosity, mention ‘the King’ and ‘the Eight’ as they had been mentioned to me.

‘Blackwards’ man Lupan spoke of “the programme”,’ I said.

‘And these terms are unknown to you?’ Alace Quatorze asked.

‘I think they are unusual ways of referring to things that I am already familiar with,’ I said. ‘I think the programme refers to the ongoing work of the Maze Undue, and the production of very high-ability pariah field agents for the service of mankind.’

‘I believe you are correct,’ she said.

‘Which makes the King, and the Eight, part of the authority that controls the Maze Undue,’ I said.



She nodded.

‘These appellations are familiar to you?’ I asked.

‘Orphaeus is the nomenclature of the King, also known as the King in Yellow, or Yellow King,’ she said. ‘It is an honorary and ritual title bestowed upon the senior controlling operative in the Angelus Subsector. There has been a Yellow King for as long as my family can remember. I doubt it has always been the same man.’

‘And the Eight?’ I asked.

‘His inner circle. The confidants of the King. His advisors. His familiars. His initiates. I don’t know how many of them there are.’

‘Eight, surely?’ I said.

She looked at me, slightly surprised, and then smiled as if charmed by something that had never occurred to her.

‘You’re right, of course,’ she said. ‘That must be it.’

Though I was keen to be cautious, I could not resist asking another question.

‘When you say “senior controlling operative”, you mean the Inquisition, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, ‘absolutely. Were you in any doubt?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Good.’

‘I also heard mention of the word “grael”,’ I said.

There was no reaction. She did not blink.

‘The grael is a concept,’ she said plainly. ‘In terms of the ancient esoteric tradition of mankind, it is simply a symbolic reference. A grael. A *grail*. Literally, a cup or chalice that contains some immutable or divine essence. In the early days of religion, in the Catharic Church, for example, the grail was a holy relic, but it was not literally a cup.’

‘You are referring to the dogmas and creeds before the rise of the Imperial Cult?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Before the cult, before the Ecclesiarchy, before the Lectitio Divinitatus. Indeed, before the war that united Terra and allowed for the Great Crusade. There were many faiths back then, and forms of the grail myth were common among them.’

‘So it’s symbolic?’ I asked.

She nodded, and took another sip of water.

‘It has been used as a cipher for many things. It was said to be the cup

from which a proto-messianic figure drank at a ceremonial supper, and as such had life-giving properties. It was also said to be a receptacle that had caught drops of his blood at his death, and thus had been similarly blessed. Other creeds took this less literally: the grail contained his blood, in as much as it was a bloodline. The genetic bloodline of the same messiah. So, a person could be a grail.'

'So it symbolises genetics?' I asked.

Alace Quatorze shrugged.

'I believe it is more about inheritance. The inheritance and transmission of anything that is valuable from one generation to the next: genetics, information, data, lore. In other parts of the tradition, the grail represented the secret knowledge of the architects, which was passed down through their brotherhoods. In the most ancient days, the skills of an architect were most precious. They were the masons, the ones who understood how to build monuments, who understood how to build houses for god.'

'A maison dieu,' I said.

She laughed.

'A Maze Undue indeed,' she said with a delighted flash of her eyes. 'I congratulate you on your knowledge of Old Franc. The construction of temples is our oldest act of faith, and those who knew the skills to perform such a task were immensely valued. A temple-*er* passed his learning in secret to novitiates in his circle. Of course...'

She trailed off, thoughtful.

'Of course what?' snapped Lightburn, betraying the fact that he had been more interested than his attitude suggested. I supposed that a man who had once lived in a temple, and had his life determined by it, would be intrigued by this talk.

Alace Quatorze turned to look at the Curst.

'I was going to say that even in this context, burdener, the concept of "architect" may be allegorical,' she said. 'We may not literally be talking about men who could build temples. We might be referring to makers. Makers of life. Architects of the cosmos. We may be talking about those rare beings who are building some great design beyond the scale of mortal man.'

'The God-Emperor would be one such architect, then?' I said.

'Yes,' she replied. 'And the sacred primarchs, His erstwhile sons, they schemed in such ways too, for better or worse. In a way, they both sought

His grail, and were His grails.'

'What about this context?' I asked.

'Grail lore is rich here in the Angelus Sub,' she said. 'Just think of this world's name. Sancour. "Sacred heart" in Old Franc. This world has always been the sacred heart of the Yellow King's ambitions.'

'How?' I asked.

'He fights a battle here, on behalf of mankind. An eternal war. A eudaemonic war. A war of good daemons.'

"We build angels to face down the dark",' I said, remembering Lupan's words.

'We always have done. We build angels, or we harness daemons. Either way, we take power from the divine and turn it against the source. The Orphaeus of old myth was a musician and a magician. With the power of his music, his song, his very words, he was able to conquer heaven and hell. He took ownership of divine properties and turned them against the divine. By extension, we may surmise that our Orphaeus is learning the properties of the warp, the very empyrean, in order to use them against the warp.'

She looked at me to read my expression.

'Of course, that is simply theory. But you can appreciate why such an Orphaeus would want a school of pariahs for such work.'

'As defences to keep him safe from the thing he is trying to master,' I said.

'The only natural defence known to humankind,' she replied. 'You would be front-line troops in his eudaemonic war. You would be his good daemons.'

'It is the purpose of the Holy Inquisition to protect mankind from the influence of the warp,' I said. 'I see now that sometimes it must take great risks to do that effectively. It must know its archenemy. It must learn to control the very flame that it wishes to extinguish.'

I got up and poured a glass of water for myself. Shadrake was still drawing me, but his head was nodding. All the drink had made him very drowsy. Alace Quatorze and Renner Lightburn were the only two really listening. I realised that we had been side-tracked. I had not got to the part where Judika had been hurt. Quickly, I told them about the efforts made to sell me to the elders of the Ecclesiarchy. I told them of the visit to the brass reading room.

'The confessor, Hodi, seemed to know about the King and the programme,' I said. 'That surprised me.'

‘Do not be surprised,’ Alace Quatorze replied. ‘The Church is a shadow under everything. It knows far more than it ever admits, and behind its regal bearing lurks an entity capable of immense intrigue.’

‘It certainly has dark secrets to hide,’ I said. I told her about the tests I had been subjected to, the assay of Enuncia.

She seemed astonished. Her reaction was, for the first time, extreme.

‘Enuncia. So that’s what the Church is up to: the language of Creation. The primal language of Chaos, of making and unmaking. Do you remember the words they had you say?’

I shook my head, for I did not.

‘It is a very cunning idea,’ she said, ‘to use pariahs in this way. As a delivery mechanism for Enuncia. A pariah is untainted and cannot alter the power of the word. They could begin to build a primer: a grimoire.’

‘A grimoire?’ I asked.

‘The word,’ she said, ‘is very closely related to the meaning of “grammar”. I am speaking of a magical grammar, which will allow them to use the words of magic to reshape reality and oppose the warp. Consider even the meaning of the word “spell”. In the beginning was the word, Padua my dear, and the language of the word was the language of knowledge, and knowledge was the precious secret kept within the grail.’

She glanced back at me.

‘Are you sure you can’t remember any of the words?’

‘Quite sure,’ I replied.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Lightburn.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘It’s nothing.’ For a moment, I thought I had heard something outside.

‘No matter how one might otherwise justify the esoteric and unorthodox activities of the Ecclesiarchy,’ I said to Alace Quatorze, ‘there is no doubting their inherent and diabolic corruption.’ I told her about the mediators, about the monstrous Scarpac and his kin of the host.

She blanched at the thought of it.

‘Traitor Marines,’ she whispered. ‘From your description, I have no doubt they were of the Seventeenth Legion. They were the Word Bearers of old Colchis. Blessed mercy save us that monsters of that kind should be here on Sancour. You’re right. The Ecclesiarchy must be damned and thrice-mad to consort with such creatures. No wonder the city is in peril. No wonder the institutions of the Holy Inquisition, such as the Maze Undue, have been

attacked and annihilated. The Archenemy is here. Imperial rule is clearly failing.'

It was a grim notion. It was something I had been imagining for several days, and to hear someone else voice it made me chill.

I started to tell them the rest, about the appearance of the thought-form that had called itself a *grael*, and about the battle that had followed, during which, I presumed, Judika had been hurt.

But I was suddenly distracted. I had heard something: the laughter of children. It had come from just outside.

At least twice in the last handful of days, traumatic events had been preceded by such a sound. Just before the attack on the Maze Undue I had heard the laughter of children, and it had chilled me. Again, in the commune. And in the confusion of the brass reading room, I could not be sure that the laughter of children had not echoed somewhere in the background.

'Are there children here?' I asked sharply.

Alace Quatorze looked stunned.

'Children?' she said.

'Are there children here?' I repeated firmly.

'I—' she began. She shook her head in disbelief. 'How could you know? We were so discreet.'

'Are there children here, Mamzel Quatorze?' I said again.

She looked almost dismayed in her surprise.

'One,' she admitted. 'Only one of the children. I do not understand how you could know that. Did someone tell you?'

'I can hear them,' I said. 'I can hear it.'

She rose. She looked aghast.

'Please. Please, Padua. We must be very careful. We cannot upset the children.'

'I think we should see them,' said Judika.

He had risen to his feet. He still looked pale and ill, and stood in an uncomfortable pose, as though his ribs hurt.

But his eyes glowed with quiet fury.

'You should sit—' Alace Quatorze began.

'No,' he snapped.

'We thought you were sleeping, Jude,' I said.

'I was drifting in and out,' he said, his gaze not wavering from her. 'I heard

what you said. You've questioned her well, Beta. An interrogator would be proud. By offering her information of your own, you've got her to give up a great deal about herself.'

I knew I had. Alace Quatorze had clearly been so hungry for information, she had spoken unguardedly.

'Of course,' Judika said, 'you haven't asked her the most important question of all.'

'I have not,' I agreed. 'I was just getting to it.'

Alace Quatorze looked quite put out. She began to look from me to Jude and back.

'What?' she asked. '*What?*'

'The real question, Mamzel Quatorze,' I said, 'is how you come to be so astonishingly well informed?'

Her face became tight and pinched. She was angry.

'You have no idea who you are dealing with,' she said.

'Precisely,' replied Judika. 'That's why we're asking.'

'I shall summon my servants. They will—'

Lightburn drew his Lammark Combination Thousander. It made a loud, metallic clack as he thumbed back the hammer.

'I'm suggesting that wouldn't be such a dandy idea,' he said.

Shadrake suddenly became alert. His exclamation of alarm woke Lucrea. The burdener swiftly switched his aim to cover the artist.

'Sit back down, you arse,' he said. Shadrake obliged very rapidly.

'Let's see this child,' said Judika.

'You don't want to do that!' Alace Quatorze exclaimed. 'Throne of Terra, are you mad? The children—'

'Let's see him,' I repeated. 'Then you can explain your business and who you are, the source of your knowledge and your intentions towards us.'

'You do not want to disturb any of the children,' Alace Quatorze said.

'You really bloody don't,' agreed Shadrake in a heartfelt stammer.

I heard the laughter again, as if it was coming from just outside. The chill knifed at me once more.

'I don't believe we have any choice,' I said. 'Show us.'

Alace Quatorze took up a vermeil candelabrum and nervously led us out into the hall. She carried the light raised in one hand, and the hem of her long dress lifted in the other. We all followed. Judika and I came behind her.

Judika had a laspistol aimed at Mamzel Quatorze, and I was helping him to walk. I had not even picked up the *cutro* I had borrowed at the basilica.

Behind us came the anxious Shadrake and the bemused Lucrea. Renner Lightburn followed, covering and herding them both.

Feverfugue was dark. It was late. A few servants appeared, drawn by the activity, and Judika told Mamzel Quatorze to dismiss them in no uncertain terms.

She told them to go back, and they did.

We walked along a hall where the floorboards squeaked under our weight. Lucrea kept talking, asking questions, until Lightburn told her to be quiet.

It was unnaturally dark. Outside the ancient pile, night had swaddled the black trees and created a veil of complete blackness. We could hear twigs and branches scratching at the roof and window panes as the night wind off the marshes stirred the invisible trees. It sounded like rats scuttling. It sounded like children, running around in an upstairs room.

We reached a pair of double doors. The candlelight showed the age of them, the worn brass of the handles, the touch-rubbed patina around the finger-plate.

‘Open it,’ said Judika. The strain of standing was making him cough again. I winced every time I heard that hard static-crackle.

‘Constant?’ Alace Quatorze asked. Lightburn allowed the drunken artist to come forwards. He pulled a heavy key from his coat pocket, and opened the doors. We went in.

‘The aula magna,’ she said.

It was a large hall. I imagine it had once been a banqueting room, or a formal dining hall, but most of the furniture, especially the main table, had been cleared out. This was where the family displayed their original Shadrakes.

The paintings hung on every wall. Alace Quatorze had Lucrea hurry around and light all the candles in the room off her candelabrum. Gradually, as the light grew brighter, we saw the painted insanity of the works around us.

I cannot describe the pictures. I do not want to, but even if I did, I would not have the right words. They were of reality distorted by his glass. They were flesh and blood, but rendered as meat, as fluid, as smoke. Grey figures, dark and smooth as slate, coiled and writhed. Their anatomies did not operate in fully human ways, though they seemed human. They seemed

primordial, like organic forms locked in some orgy of mindless congress, writhing in the smoke and ooze of an elementally wracked, new-born world.

But they also seemed to be places and people that I knew, like memories I could not pin down. I think they were pictures of the world we know as seen from a world we do not. They were images of lust and greed, avarice and appetite, desires manifested as solid things as we never see them.

And I am thankful that we never do.

‘What horrors have you done?’ Lightburn gasped. Even Lucrea seemed dismayed by the images. Shadrake looked pleased with himself, but embarrassed at the reaction.

‘I paint what I am allowed to see,’ he said.

‘Then you should not *be* allowed to see,’ the Curst declared.

‘It is what they want!’ Shadrake wailed.

‘Who?’ I asked. ‘The owners of Feverfugue?’

‘All of them,’ protested Shadrake.

‘Why have you brought us here?’ Judika asked. ‘To dismay us? Revolt us? Distract us?’

He aimed his weapon at Mamzel Quatorze’s head.

‘Show us this child!’

‘I will!’ she said. ‘He is through here! We had to come past the paintings to reach him.’

She looked at me sadly.

‘They soothe him,’ she added.

She walked to the end of the aula magna’s gallery, and opened another door. I heard her speak to someone.

Then I heard a reply.

A voice like soft music, a man’s voice.

‘But of course, Alace, show them in.’

I went to the door with Judika. Beyond Alace Quatorze, I saw a large anteroom. More pictures, the product of Shadrake’s madness, hung there. The room was lit by many, many tapers and glow-globes. The floor seemed to be covered in rose petals, thousands of discarded pink petals, which were scattered and piled in drifts like fallen blossom. There was a large basin on the floor, a ceramic bowl large enough to wash clothes in. It seemed to be full of black ink. Beside it was a very large chair, a high-backed throne of richly upholstered wood, with huge, raised arms. Two long, golden ribbons



of silk hung over one of the arms, and curled down onto the petal-strewn floor.

A man sat in the chair. He was, it appeared, a very powerful man of impressive physique. He was, it also appeared, naked but for a loin cloth. His body, entirely hairless, was oiled as though he had just stepped from a bathing pool and been attended to by concubines. He had a goblet in one hand, and a book in the other, and was lounging in the throne in the most relaxed manner.

The pupils of his eyes were gold. He looked at us. He was already smiling, but the smile broadened at the sight of us to reveal perfect white teeth like pieces of alabaster. I felt Alace Quatorze shudder.

‘Are you the pariahs?’ he asked. His voice was soft and flowed like music. ‘It is such a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Such an infinite pleasure.’

‘What is this?’ Judika hissed. ‘You said children! Who is this? There are no children here!’

‘There most certainly is,’ said the man. He rose to his feet, and put the book down. Only when he was standing did we realise how tall he was. He was inhumanly tall. He was larger than any mortal could ever be.

‘I am Teke,’ he said, smiling all the while.

# CHAPTER 33

*Which concerns an emergence or revelation*

‘Don’t hurt them, smiling one,’ said Alace Quatorze.

‘Of course I won’t,’ said the giant. ‘You Glaws, always so very suspicious. Your father was the same, and his sire before him. Just because we were built for war, it doesn’t follow that we must always act with violence. I was relaxing. I was reading. I am in a gentle mood. Besides, these are the two you said you’d bring for me, are they not?’

‘I may have told them too much,’ said Alace Quatorze.

‘And I may have to punish you for that,’ said the thing called Teke. His smile remained, constant like a star. ‘So like a Glaw to get carried away with your own significance.’

A sweet smell was filling the room, the smell of petals, I supposed. It was oppressive, almost overpowering. Judika began to cough, and became quite helpless with it. The static crackle was worse than ever. I felt as though Jude was trying to do something – perhaps even attack the giant – but his hopeless cough was preventing him.

The giant, Teke, looked at him with a soulful expression, though his smile never wavered.

‘Oh you,’ he said sympathetically. ‘Poor you. What’s your name?’

Judika was coughing so badly he couldn’t answer.

‘Judika,’ I said, hoping to appease the creature. Teke was not in any way threatening, except for his scale and his unnerving smile.

‘It’s too late for poor Judika, isn’t it?’ he asked, looking at me. ‘Too late.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘My, but you’re beautiful,’ Teke said to me, regarding me intently. ‘As

beautiful as the boy. Those eyes, that mouth. The hard absence of soul. It's such a shame he's been spoiled.'

'What do you mean?' I asked again, more urgently.

'What is your name?' the smile asked.

'Tell him!' gabbled Alace Quatorze. 'For Throne's sake, tell him!'

'I am Bequin,' I said.

Teke took a step towards me, smiling. He made a curious gesture with his left hand, and all the petals in the room flew up from the floor like a swarm of insects, encircled him, and clothed him. Suddenly, he was wearing a full bodysuit of soft pink. The sweet smell grew stronger, like some odour of sanctity.

'Did you know,' he asked me, 'that of all the multifarious species of the galaxy, the human race is the only one in which nulls naturally occur?'

He looked at me.

'The only one,' he repeated. 'Only the human race breeds weapons that can silence the warp.'

I did not reply.

'You, Bequin,' he said, 'you will serve the Children, but Judika will not be suitable. He has come to us too late. The King has already tampered with him.'

Judika's coughing fit had become so bad that he had fallen to his knees. Mamzel Quatorze was trying to help him.

'Renner!' I cried. 'Lucrea! Please! Help me with Judika. We must make him comfortable. Help me carry him out and fetch him water!'

Lightburn, Lucrea and Shadrake were in the doorway behind us, too alarmed to fully enter.

Teke was suddenly beside me. He had moved without me seeing it. He took hold of Judika and lifted him clear off the ground as one might pick up a cat or a child.

'He can't leave,' Teke said. 'Even hurt like this, he's too dangerous.'

'Let him go!' I cried.

Teke did not, but he shot a look at me. His smile remained, but there was no smile in his eyes.

'What ails poor Judika so?' he asked. 'He is hurt badly, isn't he?'

Holding him off the ground with one hand, Teke tore Judika's coat and shirt away with his other. He stripped off Judika's upper garments. We all suddenly saw the wound in Judika's side.

It wasn't a physical wound. It was a mark, a weal that seemed to run across the fabric of his reality, like a distortion in space rather than damage to flesh. It was awful to see. I wondered what manner of thing could have left such a mark on him.

Teke raised the helpless Judika up so he could stare closely at the wound. He sniffed it. He delicately extended an alarmingly long tongue and licked it.

'Word Bearer,' he said.

'They are here, smiling one,' Alace Quatorze said agitatedly. 'I have just learned as much.'

'Here?' asked Teke, glancing at her. His teeth flashed white. 'Those byblow scum are here on Sancour? Sniffing around and hungry, I'll be bound. One of their blades did this. One of their cursed weapons. One of the edges soiled with the toxic words of their chattering sire.'

'Please, let him go,' I said.

Teke looked at me, shrugged diffidently, and simply let Judika go. My friend fell to the ground with a bone-bruising force. He writhed in pain, still coughing. I started forwards, but Lightburn grabbed me and pulled me back.

Teke stooped down at Judika's side. He stroked Judika's hair.

'Really?' he said. 'Do you persist? What will it take to dislodge it? I thought a fall might have weakened its grip. Must I dash you against the ground repeatedly? Come on. Out you come. Out you come.'

Judika began to shudder and convulse. I suddenly heard the laughter of children all around us. We all heard it. It was like ghosts dancing around the walls of the room, echoes of past lives that haunted the ancient house.

A bloodshot light filled the room. It welled up out of Judika. It was the thought-form.

It was unmistakably Grael Magent.

'Oh no you don't,' tutted Teke. 'This is no time for last stands.'

He reached out his right hand without looking. One of the golden ribbons coiled over the arm of his throne whirled up into the air towards him. By the time it was in his hand, it had become a straight, slender longsword made of chased gold. Still crouched, he whirled it in his hand so he was gripping it blade-down like a dagger, and stabbed it down through Judika.

The blade skewered him to the floor. He was pinned like a butterfly, like an insect specimen on a felt pad. The blade must have gone at least half a

metre into the ground. I screamed, I think, in utter horror, but my cry was lost in the much more terrible scream that rang out. It was like the one I had heard in the brass reading room. Again, the universe shrieked. Reality squealed. It was even worse than before. The material universe split at the puncture point, and the bloodshot energy of the thought-form boiled, seethed and then blew away like dust.

Judika, impaled, went into horrible convulsions, drumming his limbs on the ground. Then he went limp. His head flopped back and his mouth lolled open. His eyes rolled dead and white. The laughter of children went away, erased in the dying echoes of the scream.

Something slipped out of his open mouth onto the floor beside his face. It rolled out, white and wet, like a spit-ball. It was the size of a rose bloom. I realised that the frothy white spittle covering it and trailing from it back to Judika's lips was cobweb. It crackled as it moved, the web making a hard, crisp sound like vox static.

The object uncoiled, parting the web that wrapped it.

It was a spider, a blind white thing, an albino relic from some lightless cave. It had come out of Judika's throat, out of his chest.

Its legs waved helplessly.

Teke the Smiling One rose and crushed it under his right foot. He ground it into the floor. There was a certain relish to the way he did this. I could hear the static vox crackle of the webbing as he mashed it.

'May all the Eight perish in such fashion,' he said.

'The Eight?' I whispered, my mind uncomprehending.

He smiled his smile at me.

'Your friend was one of them. Did you not know? He would have made you one too. One of the Eight. Eight for the legs. Eight for the points. And eight because that's what they ate.'

Teke drew the sword out. He walked back to his throne and let go of his longsword. By the time it struck the throne's high arm, it was just a strand of golden ribbon again, and it draped across the arm-rest onto the floor. Teke stood, his back to us, and stretched his arms wide, as though he was tired and bored. I ran to Judika, and knelt by him. He was dead. He was already cold. His corpse stank of the thought-form's psychomagic. A shadow of the bloodshot light clung to him.

I was already in a heightened, distressed state because of the murder of my friend. On top of that, I seemed to be facing incontrovertible proof that he

had been Grael Magent, or that Grael Magent had somehow resided within him. Was that why the thought-form had interceded on my behalf against Sister Tharpe in the attics of the Maze Undue? Was that why it had broken in to save me from Hodi and the mediators? Jude's warp-wound hadn't been caused indirectly during the turmoil at the basilica. He had been at the heart of it. Scarpac's cursed blade had done it.

He had hurt himself cruelly trying to rescue me from their clutches.

What was he? How had he become this thing? Or how had he come to be its vessel? What did that say about the secret operation, and the candidates, of the Maze Undue?

What did that say about me?

I began to focus on my tempering litany, trying desperately to hear Sister Bismillah's voice and calmly focus my mind. I knew I would not survive if I could not.

Teke turned back to face us.

'Now,' he began. He stopped.

I was still kneeling at poor Judika's side, but I was aiming Judika's laspistol at the giant in a firm, two-handed grip.

'Stay there,' I said.

'Don't be foolish,' the smile said.

I rose slowly, still aiming.

'Stay there,' I said.

'Don't!' Alace Quatorze blurted. 'Don't anger him! Don't provoke him. My dear, you have no idea what you're risking—'

'Be quiet,' I told her without looking at her. My focus was Teke. 'We're leaving. You will not prevent us.'

'Are you really so upset that I killed your friend?' Teke's smile asked. 'He *wasn't* your friend, you know. You do know that, don't you? He was a bastard of the Eight, a hybrid of the King's inner circle. A eudaemon thrall. He was no friend to you. He and his ilk wanted you to become one of them. It was your destiny.'

The smile broadened.

'It wasn't going to be a nice destiny,' Teke said. 'Though you wouldn't have been aware of it once you were in it. It would have twisted you so much you wouldn't have realised it was a living hell. Because of something you ate, you see? I saved you from that.'

'Don't expect any gratitude.'

‘I won’t,’ he said. ‘I just expect your service. You belong to the Children now. We have other, loftier destinies for you.’

‘I refuse,’ I said.

‘You don’t get to refuse,’ replied Teke.

‘Oh, my Throne, stop provoking him!’ Quatorze wailed.

‘We are leaving,’ I stated firmly. I began to back towards the door. The smiling giant took a step forwards.

At the door, Lightburn swept out his man-stopping revolver and aimed it with a hammer-clack. Shadrake and Lucrea cowered behind him.

Now covered by two steadily-aimed weapons, the giant chuckled.

‘A hard-round revolver and a laspistol? Oh my. Whatever will I do?’

‘Shut up and bleed out?’ the Curst suggested.

Teke was looking at me. He took another provocative step.

‘I don’t want to hurt you, Bequin,’ he said.

He paused.

‘Well, of course, I do. Very much. Right up to the unthinkable point where it becomes a pleasure for both of us. But I can’t. I’m not allowed to. You’re too valuable.’

He paused again.

‘So put the gun down. I can’t hurt you, but I will detain you.’

He stopped smiling for a second. In less time than it takes for a human heart to beat, I knew that the talking was done.

He started to move, a blur. Alace Quatorze screamed. I fired.

The las-round, a dart of hard white light, split Teke’s left cheek and left a scorched groove. Lightburn’s first round tore into the giant’s ribcage from the side.

Neither stopped him.

He reached me, grabbed me, and threw me aside. I fell, rolled and tried to hold on to my weapon. Lightburn was still firing, emptying every chamber of his gun. Flattened lumps of metal, the impact-squashed remains of his bullets, fell off Teke’s soft, pink bodyglove and rang off the floor like coins.

Teke gestured at the Curst. A storm of pink rose petals flew from his arm, reducing the length of the sleeve and baring his skin. The petals swirled at Renner. He staggered and tried to fight them off, but they swept him to the ground. He struggled and fought, trying to protect his face and ears, like a man being attacked by a cloud of angry bees.

Teke was half-turned from me. Still prone, I started to fire again, punching

las-round after las-round into his long, broad back. I saw burned black punctures appear like craters on a pink-dust moonscape. He snapped around at me. His smile was back. As he leapt towards me, he reached out his right hand, and a gold ribbon flew into it from the throne. The ribbon became a golden longsword. The sword became a blur. My laspistol became two pieces, the snout and muzzle severed from the grip. The cut edges of the metal were bright and sharp, sliced with impossible precision.

He reached for me. I punched what was left of the pistol I was holding into his chest, so that the razor-sharp cut edges sheared into him. It drew blood. Still smiling, he looked surprised. He back-hand slapped me and the blow threw me across the floor towards the door. I heard him padding forwards after me to sweep me up.

I set my cuff to *dead*.

He snarled and staggered back, momentarily pinched by my blankness.

‘Run!’ I yelled. Shadrake, Lucrea and Alace Quatorze were already running back through the aula magna. Lightburn scrambled up. The swarm attacking him had turned back into rose petals and had fallen off him, dead. I caught his arm and we ran together. Behind us, Teke raged out a furious cry of frustration.

We reached the end of the aula magna’s nightmare gallery, following Lucrea, Shadrake and Quatorze into the rest of the gloomy house. I looked back.

I could see Teke standing in the bright room where we had found him. My blankness was receding from him. I was far enough away for his psychomagic to return. He clothed himself. The pink petals swirled around him, and formed a new suit of more robust shape. The black oil in the ceramic basin on the floor became a living, gleaming ooze that splashed up his body, wrapped it, and turned several parts of his form glossy black. The two gold ribbons fluttered into his waiting hands and became a pair of long, slender swords.

I saw his true form. It was beautiful and awful where Scarpac’s had been grotesque and beautiful, but it was the same.

Teke was a Traitor Marine. He was magnificent, like a true predator. Gleaming pink and glossy black and shimmering gold, he sprang after us.



# CHAPTER 34

*Which concerns transition*

We ran, slamming doors behind us. The old, dark house shook. He was behind us, howling in a feral, sing-song voice.

Screams echoed from other parts of Feverfugue, out of the darkness of night and trees that enclosed the place. I imagined it was servants and household staff, woken in terror by involuntary nightmares.

‘We need to get away from here!’ I yelled at Alace Quatorze. ‘Where are your motor carriages kept?’

‘There’s no time for that!’ she wailed in reply. ‘Teke is too fleet! He is too quick and clever! We’d never even get off the grounds.’

I believed she was right.

‘Why would you consort with a being like that?’ Lightburn raged. He was trying to reload his revolver as he ran, but the effort was doomed.

‘For the gifts he bestows,’ Alace Quatorze cried. ‘For the promises he makes!’

We ran into another room and slammed the heavy doors. I looked at Alace Quatorze.

‘That doesn’t seem enough,’ I said.

‘You haven’t seen the gifts,’ said Shadrake. He was breathing very hard, already out of breath.

‘My family was great once,’ said Alace Quatorze. ‘The name Glaw was respected across subsectors. We had power and influence, but we were brought low. An alliance with the Children could restore our fortunes. In return for our help in the materium, they would favour us in the immaterium. I could—’

‘You’re insane,’ I pointed out.

We doubled back into another wing, hoping to confuse or even shake off the pursuit. The walls were red plaster and the floors were black marble, all picked out by the vague glow of the occasional candle or sconce. Some rooms had furniture, but there was no sign of life or proper habitation. Feverfuge was a structure that resembled a grand home, but only superficially. No actual life dwelt there. It was like a stage set.

Screams still echoed from rooms above. We could hear doors being smashed.

‘Is there a way out of here?’ I asked. ‘Can we hide in the woods?’

‘You cannot hide from him,’ Alace Quatorze said emphatically.

‘Perhaps,’ I said. ‘But he cannot hide from us, either.’

I turned to Shadrake, grabbed him, and searched his pockets until I found his sighting glass. He protested feebly, and tried to fight me off.

I raised the glass, and, through it, saw the skeletal ghost of the house, the imprint of its structures and walls upon reality, and the folds that these made where they conjoined with other spaces. I saw deranged geometries inside the spatial engineering of the world I understood.

And I saw Teke. He was visible as a hot white silhouette. He was racing from room to room, from hall to hall, searching for us. My blankness was, I believe, disconcerting him, and making him unable to trust his transhuman senses and his armour’s formidable sensory apparatus, not to mention the warp-magic that came so easily to him. He seemed frustrated and enraged. He kept stopping to vent his anger on doors or walls or even furniture by shredding them with his twinned blades.

He also, I felt with a cold dismay, seemed to be enjoying it. He was enjoying the hunt. It was prolonging the pleasure of achieving the kill.

Every time he turned our way, or seemed to sense where we were, I guided us in an opposite or contradictory direction. The glass led me. We were able, several times, to double-back and even pass very close by him, without him realising, sometimes at no greater distance of separation than a wall. We heard him, snorting and hissing, laughing and bemoaning. We heard his swords rend and slice. We stayed a few steps away from him, and kept him at bay.

Or was he, I wondered after a while, just playing with us?

We suddenly found ourselves in a small courtyard. We’d opened a door and it had led us out. It was cold and dark. Black trees hissed against a

black sky beyond the black eaves. The air smelled wet. I could see a faint hint of moon-glow behind the trees.

‘Oh, you dangerous witch!’ Alace Quatorze cried. ‘Look what you’ve done! Look where you’ve led us!’

‘Where?’ I asked.

‘You’ve taken us through!’ Shadrake laughed, startled.

‘You’ve taken us too far,’ spat Alace Quatorze. ‘You’ve taken us to the City of Dust.’

I turned and looked at her.

‘That’s nonsense. A myth,’ I said.

‘No myth,’ said Shadrake.

‘If there is a City of Dust at all,’ I insisted, ‘then it is out beyond the Sunderland in the desert. Not here, through a door in your miserable old house.’

‘But it *is*, that is the point,’ said Alace Quatorze. ‘In the long ago, Orphaeus moved the twin city sideways, out of line with Queen Mab, so that it stood like a dusty shadow cast by one city into the other. It is the extimate shadow of Queen Mab. It was the first step in his construction of a bridgehead in the immaterium.’

She looked at me with her remarkable eyes.

‘Feverfugue was always said to be one of the crossing points, one of the places where the harrowed paths and holloways actually penetrated through to the other side. That was why I bought the place. I have been searching for the transition point ever since, searching every room and trying every door in that endless maze of a house! For years! And now you just lead us there?’

I didn’t know what to say. It didn’t seem like we were in any kind of other world at all, though I have to confess I had no idea what being in another world might feel like.

‘You are saying,’ I began, ‘we are somehow in Queen Mab’s twin? The secret city?’

‘Yes!’ Alace Quatorze said.

‘But I wasn’t even trying to—’ I began.

‘Yet you did. See how talented you are?’

Teke the Smiling One stood in the doorway behind us. He was leaning against the door frame, arms folded, two golden ribbons fluttering from his waist harness. His pink and black armour, edged with delicate filigrees of

gold, was as beautiful and ornate as a piece of jewellery. His smile was perfect.

‘Access to the Yellow King’s extimate bastion has long been desired by the Children,’ he said. ‘You have provided us with it. Within just hours of knowing you, Bequin... sweet Mamzel Bequin... you have already performed an extraordinary service for us.’

He stepped out into the darkness to join us. His huge armoured feet crunched upon gravel it was too dark to see. I heard the servo motors sigh and whirr inside the panels of his armour.

‘Perhaps you will lead us to the rest of the Eight? Or find the fastness location of the King himself. My master Fulgrim would very much like that. The King is more of a threat to us than anything the False Emperor can devise.’

I raised the sighting glass.

‘What can I see if I look at you?’ I asked.

I gagged, and almost vomited. I snatched the glass away and broke the view. Exposed by its lens, Teke was neither beautiful nor smiling.

‘Let’s go,’ Teke said, ‘just you and I. The others can stay here. I have no interest in them one way or another.’

‘Will you let them live?’ I asked.

‘I won’t kill them, if that’s what you mean.’

I took a deep breath, and then a step towards him.

‘Beta, don’t!’ cried Lightburn.

‘It’s all right,’ I said to him. ‘He can take me if he’ll spare you.’

‘Oh, he likes you, doesn’t he?’ said Teke, smiling at the Curst. ‘Do you want to bring him too, as your plaything?’

‘Spare them and I’ll come with you,’ I said.

Teke nodded and led me back into the house.

‘Wait!’ Alace Quatorze cried. ‘What about me? I arranged all this for you! I worked so hard to achieve it! I secured Feverfugue and the pariahs! How can you just—’

Teke looked at her disdainfully.

‘In one hour, without even knowing she was doing it, she has led us through the house-maze and found a backdoor to the City of Dust. How many years have you been trying and failing to do that, Glaw? How many?’

‘But—’

‘The Glaws were once something to be reckoned with,’ Teke smiled.

‘Pontius especially. I always did like him. Great achievers, by human standards. But you, Alace, you’re really not much. Just a rather sad footnote to the family line.’

‘No!’ Alace Quatorze cried.

I followed him into the candle-haunted hallway.

‘Where do we go?’ I asked him.

‘Back through the maze into Queen Mab,’ he said. ‘There I will summon my kin, and we will begin to plan our assault on the King’s extimate bastion through this unexpected and secret access. He will never see it coming. He will never expect that a precious product of his programme will be turned against him.’

‘I am not his product,’ I said. ‘I used to think I understood my place in the world, and the role that had been intended for me, but now I think I truly don’t belong to anybody. My destiny is not fixed. I am not the King’s, nor am I the Inquisition’s, and I am certainly not yours.’

‘Oh, I think you are,’ he replied. ‘You belong to the Emperor’s Children now.’

‘There’s only one thing I’m really certain of,’ I said.

He paused and turned to look back at me. His white smile gleamed in the candlelight.

‘What might that be?’ he asked.

‘Being outside,’ I said. ‘Just breathing in the air of a different world. I realised something.’

I looked straight at him.

‘I’ve remembered what the word was,’ I said.

# CHAPTER 35

*Which concerns a convergence*

I spoke the word.

The force of it struck Teke and hurled him away from me. He looked surprised for a moment. Then he vanished in the astonishing shockwave of fury that followed the pronouncement, and crashed through several walls. They splintered and shattered like glass.

I didn't know how long he'd stay down for. I doubted he was dead, though the word would have slain a lesser being. I felt utterly spent, as if saying the word had sucked all the vital energy out of me. I doubted I could say it again for a while, if at all.

'Renner! Hurry!' I yelled.

He ran to me and we started to flee. Shadrake and Lucrea came after us. Of Mamzel Quatorze, there was no sign.

'She went away,' Lucrea said. 'She ran off into the night outside.'

The *other* night. The *extimate* night.

'Did you not want to go that way too?' I asked Shadrake.

He shook his head. He was scared. He had seen many things in his corrupted life, but something about the darkness outside had been too much for him. I think he was crying.

I used the sighting glass again, and tried to follow my way back through the labyrinthine structure of the house. Perversely, it was harder to do it deliberately than it had ever been to do it by accident.

After some twenty or twenty-five minutes, we reached a hallway that I felt sure I recognised. It was very hard to tell if we had crossed back. It was even harder to tell if we had ever crossed over in the first place. Everything

seemed too fantastical and made up of lies, though when a being like Teke the Smiling One tells you something, you tend to lend it some weight.

The house had fallen very silent. The screaming had stopped, and so had the sounds of branches brushing and raging at the roof tiles. Most of the candles were burned low and guttering. I felt certain that most of the servant staff, woken by awful, sympathetic nightmares, had fled the place.

Our pace slowed. The quieter it grew, the more cautious I became.

‘Did you hear—?’ Lucrea said suddenly.

‘What?’

‘Like children...’ she began.

I quickly imagined the ghastly laughter of children that had accompanied the grael manifestations, but that was not what she meant.

‘Like children playing,’ she said. ‘Scurrying around. Little feet and—’

I pushed on, suddenly concerned. I threw open doors and drew back heavy drapes.

‘What are you looking for?’ Lightburn asked.

‘I think they’re here,’ I said.

‘Who?’ asked Renner.

I pointed. A diminutive figure had stepped out from behind one of the drapes and stood glaring at us.

‘Look now!’ Shadrake said. ‘A child! Hello, child. You must be lost, you poor thing.’

It was the girl doll from the emporium. She was still missing her bun of human hair, and from the expression on her painted wooden face, she still blamed me for this bitter loss.

‘Shadrake!’ I cried, but he was already reaching for the doll, his addled perception truly mistaking it for a lost child.

There was a brief flash, and the artist screamed. He staggered backwards, the fingers of his right hand falling off, blood jetting. The doll’s toy knife had severed them in one vicious stroke.

Shadrake was screaming and bleeding wildly. The doll took a step forwards.

‘The Blackwards have found us,’ I said.

‘Screw the Blackwards,’ Lightburn replied. He aimed and fired his revolver, blowing the doll back against the wall. The impact splintered its torso and sheared off its right arm. It fell on its side, its mouth clacking.

‘Where’s the other one?’ I cried.

Revolted by the doll, Lucrea ran forwards and grabbed the stricken thing. She hurled it away from the screaming artist, and sent it tumbling along the top of a polished varwood console. The impact spilled over the candles there. In a moment, the twitching doll had caught fire. Its clothes burned. Its paint peeled. Its wooden framework began to blaze. It jiggled and trembled wildly. It struggled to its feet, and then fell still on the console top as flames overwhelmed it.

I wondered how Lucrea could have seen all the things she had seen that night and been most dismayed by a doll to react with such revulsion. I supposed it was because a doll was something she could still understand and graduate a response to. Everything else was abstract nightmare. I also believe it had, by then, been some time since her last consumption of any substances, and paranoia was accompanying her fretful withdrawal.

‘Where’s the other one?’ I repeated, yelling now.

Lightburn hunted around. Shadrake was too busy trying to collect up his missing fingers.

I spotted the boy doll. He emerged from behind a side table. His face was still bright red from the dye that had covered him in the commune’s pigment room. He took one look at us, and ran towards the door.

‘Stop him!’ I yelled.

Lightburn and I gave chase. Lucrea came behind, trying to calm the wailing Shadrake and staunch his blood loss.

‘Don’t leave us here!’ she cried. ‘Come on, Constant. They’re leaving us behind!’

‘My hand. My bloody hand!’ Shadrake howled.

The boy doll, Red Head, ran away down the next hall, his tiny shoes clattering on the tiled floor. The Curst tried another shot, but missed.

‘What is that thing?’ he asked in alarm.

‘Something we have to stop!’ I replied, running on. ‘It mustn’t tell them we’re here!’

‘Too late for that,’ said Balthus Blackwards.

We skidded to a halt. We had reached the main entrance hall of Feverfugue, and he was standing just ahead of us. To either side of him stood two of his bodyguards. Red Head ran up to them and hid behind Blackwards’ legs.

‘I need a weapon,’ I said to Lightburn.

‘No, you don’t, you can just share my gun,’ he replied sarcastically. I



wondered if I had the word back in me again, but it felt as if I did not. I retained a sensation of being empty.

‘You really are proving to be quite troublesome,’ said Balthus Blackwards.

‘And you are proving to be quite reckless,’ I replied. ‘Whatever you feel you can gain from this, in terms of money or favour, I can assure you it was not worth following me here. This is a cursed place, and there is danger here you cannot begin to imagine.’

‘I am protected,’ said Blackwards.

‘Those sell-swords will not stand a chance against what lies in this house,’ I replied. ‘You will not be taking us to your clients.’

‘I will not have to,’ he replied, and casually clicked a small vox-pulser. I felt an ultrasonic tingle.

A nasty blue-white light bloomed beside him, twinkled and expanded. As it grew, a second light did the same the other side of him. They were teleport flares.

They bloomed, they swam, they shimmered, and then they fused into solid, concrete forms. A stink of ozone filled the air as the light faded.

Scarpac the Word Bearer stood on Blackwards’ left. Another of Scarpac’s host stood on his right.

‘My clients will come to me,’ said Blackwards.

The Traitor Marines surged forwards to seize us. Though their speed was equal to that of Teke, their movement was markedly different. They were brute fury, like tanks or charging aurochs. Teke had moved with the fluid grace of a serpent.

Lightburn and I turned and ran from them, yelling at Lucrea and Shadrake coming up behind us to do the same. I lost my grip on the sighting glass and it fell to the floor. There was no time to go back for it.

Lucrea saw the menace at once, but Shadrake was too far gone with pain and distress to react fast enough. Scarpac simply punched the artist out of his way. He punched him aside and did not even break stride. The impact of the huge fist was so great, however, that blood and tissue splattered the wall, and poor Shadrake was neither in one piece nor alive when he hit the floor.

There was another blistering flash of light, and a third Word Bearer materialised in our path. We were boxed between the three of them.

And suddenly, we were caught by Teke the Smiling One too.

I cannot say where he came from, except, perhaps, the shadows. He howled a death-song as he ran at the three crimson brutes. His golden

longswords slashed the air.

The nearest Word Bearer turned, the one most recently arrived. He began to raise his boltgun, but Teke was right on him. The warrior of the Emperor's Children, resplendent in pink and black, put one long golden blade clean through the Word Bearer's shoulder, taking his arm off entirely. The boltgun fired twice as the hand went into spasm, and the shots blew vast holes in the wall behind us, peppering us with grit. Teke's other sword cut through the Word Bearer's helm diagonally, removing a section equivalent to about one-third. Blood and brain matter burst into the air as the head came apart. For good measure, Teke kicked the dismembered Word Bearer out of his way.

Scarpac was waiting to meet him, his cursed blade drawn. They clashed with a fury, raking and cracking at one another with their swords. Scarpac, for all his brutish manner, was impressive. With his one, heavy blade he managed to fend off the lightning-fast strikes of Teke's pair. The other Word Bearer tried to risk a shot at the warrior of the Emperor's Children, but dared not hit his commander. He put up his bolter, drew a sword, and joined the battle. Now Teke was fighting two of them off, a golden sword fighting each one.

I had never seen combat of such a pitch. It was too fast to follow. The transhuman reactions and speeds were appalling. Their matched strengths were such that every blow, including every parry, produced a concussive shockwave that pummelled every human in the vicinity. It was titanic, in as much as it was like something from the most ancient proto-myths. It was like the warfare the gods engaged in before man was ready to be created.

It was like a glimpse of the terrible war of wars that had riven the stars at the time of the Heresy, the monumental War of Primarchs, because of which the galaxy had burned.

'While they are busy,' I urged, and Lightburn and I ran back down the hall with poor Lucrea in tow. She was crying almost hysterically.

We were ready to face Blackwards and his men. Anything was better than the superhuman carnage being wrought in the chamber behind us. It was shaking the very foundations of Feverfugue.

But in the hall, there was no sign of Blackwards, his doll or his bodyguards. The front door to the house stood wide open, and we could see the dark driveway and the monstrous blackness of the trees outside.

'I don't understand,' I said.

‘They fled,’ said a voice. ‘They saw the error of their ways and they fled.’  
I turned to look at the speaker. I recognised the voice. It was a very particular voice that had special significance for me.

I simply could not believe I was hearing it.

She was standing in the doorway, the night framing her red habit and her starched white wimple.

‘Hurry, Beta dear,’ said Sister Bismillah. ‘We can’t stay here.’

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# CHAPTER 36

## *Ordo Hereticus*

‘Sister?’ I stammered.

‘Hurry. Hurry now, Beta,’ she said. ‘Come, my child. There is no time to delay. Bring your friends.’

Sister Bismillah smiled and held out her arms to me. I hurried to her.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked, embracing her.

‘My job,’ she sighed. ‘My appointed duty. Which is a thing that I have been very lax about.’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I have watched over you for years, Beta, since you were tiny. It was only meant to be a temporary function, but I stayed on permanently once we realised who you were.’

Now I was properly confused.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘I mean I spent two decades keeping a safe eye on you,’ said Sister Bismillah, ‘and then in one night the Maze Undue falls and I lose you.’

She embraced me again.

‘I thought you were dead, Beta. I love you like a daughter, and I thought that my negligence had led to your death. We have been looking for you ever since.’

‘Who is “we”?’ I asked.

She promised that answers would follow. The frightful war between the Traitor Marines was splintering the plaster and threatening to burst through into the main hall. Some of the heraldic gesso plaques were falling off the walls and shattering on the hall floor. Sister Bismillah led us outside, her

arm around me. Lightburn followed, comforting the sobbing Lucrea.

Outside, it was cool, and the very depths of the night. A wind stirred the ancient woods, but it was just a hushing sound. It was so dark we could not distinguish sky or ground, or trunk or branch. Behind us, the ghostly frontage of the house was just visible. From inside came terrible sounds of violence and pulses of light.

Sister Bismillah had us follow her away from the house into the woods.

‘There is a clearing,’ she told me, as if this explained everything.

‘It was Sister Tharpe,’ I said to her. ‘She was the one. She infiltrated the Maze Undue, and brought its doom down on us.’

‘She was an implant agent,’ Sister Bismillah agreed. ‘Just like me, I suppose. She was set upon one function and I upon another. I blame myself. I should have seen her for what she was. Amusingly, she had no idea who I was. We fooled each other. Did she hurt you?’

I shook my head.

‘Good,’ said Sister Bismillah.

‘I may have hurt her,’ I admitted.

‘I see,’ she said, and gave me a hug for comfort.

‘I really should have known her,’ she said, ruefully. ‘Our paths had virtually crossed. We were just of different times. It is ironic, I suppose. I’m just glad you got out safely. I should have had more faith in my Beta.’

‘I think Tharpe was Cognitae,’ I said. ‘Do you know what that means?’

Sister Bismillah looked at me in surprise.

‘I *do* know what that means, Beta. I’m surprised you do. The Cognitae usually covers itself very carefully in other masks. To answer your question, no, she wasn’t. Sister Tharpe was not Cognitae. Her name was Patience Kys, and she was a high-level operative of the Holy Inquisition.’

‘What?’ I exclaimed. ‘How could she be—’

‘She was,’ Sister Bismillah assured me.

‘Please explain this!’ I begged her. ‘I am so lost! There is nothing I can trust!’

‘You can trust *me*,’ she replied.

Behind us, through the trees, a savage explosion blew out part of the front of Feverfuge house. Flame light licked up into the darkness. The trees around us became partly visible, and suddenly they were casting hard shadows in the orange glare.

We had reached the clearing. I saw the night sky, and a handful of familiar

stars, the constellations that watched over Queen Mab at that time of year: Orpheul, Geminus, Sagitar, Lupo.

More explosions rattled the air behind us. We felt the heat of them as a warm wash of air. I heard bolter fire. One of the Traitor Marine factions had, I believe, called in reinforcements.

I scarcely cared. My mental fortitude was exhausted.

Sister Bismillah pulled out a vox hand-held and cued it.

‘Gauntlet wishes Thorn,’ she said. ‘By Moon of Pain, waxing.’

‘Confirmed,’ crackled the vox.

‘Do it well,’ she scolded into the vox. ‘I’m not there to show you how.’

‘Oh blah blah,’ the voice replied. ‘Have some faith.’

She glanced at me.

‘It’s usually my job,’ she said. ‘At least, it used to be. But I knew I had to be the one who came in for you. I was the only one you’d trust.’

‘I do trust you,’ I said. ‘I just don’t know who you are.’

‘I hear engines!’ Lightburn hissed.

So did I. They were powerful engines, main lifter units, but they were also muted as if suppressed for stealth operations. I suddenly realised that part of the night sky above us, a huge black cross, had separated from the rest of the darkness and was descending into the clearing. I saw the pale blue tongues of burner jets. We all felt a fierce downrush of air. It swished the grass and the black trees.

‘What is that?’ asked Lucrea.

‘It’s called a gun-cutter,’ said Sister Bismillah.

The massive flier settled into the clearing on its landing claws. We felt the thump of its weight underfoot. I heard fallen twigs and branches crack as the claws crushed them. Even though it was dark, I could sense from the silhouette that the craft was heavily armed and armoured. I saw a faint green luminosity coming from the small cockpit windows above the beak nose. A drop hatch opened under the nose, letting greenish light spill out into the clearing.

‘Come,’ said Sister Bismillah. We ducked our heads down into the murmuring downwash and ran for the ramp.

We boarded a half-lit, spartan cargo cabin. As soon as we were in, the ramp closed, and we felt the sway as the craft lifted off. Its engine nose rose. There was a little swing to all motion as it swept up and away from the

woodland site. Cables, chains and other suspended instruments along the cargo bay wall sashayed slightly as the nose turned.

‘Follow me,’ said Sister Bismillah, and led us up the short, sloped companionway into the craft’s main passenger space.

A man I knew all too well was waiting for us. He was seated behind one of the built-in tables. The bulk of his frame barely fitted.

‘You made it,’ he said to Sister Bismillah.

‘It was right that I did it,’ she said.

He nodded.

‘Take over from Nayl, please,’ he said. ‘I get so unsettled when he flies.’

Sister Bismillah nodded. She took off her starched wimple, and her red gloves. I realised I had never seen her hands or her hair before. She was much more elegant than I had assumed. She seemed younger too.

Her hands seemed to be covered in some kind of intricate circuitry.

She smiled at me, and then hugged me again.

‘My name is Medea Betancore,’ she said, ‘and I am very glad to be able to greet you properly and honestly at long last, after all these years. Welcome, Alizebeth.’

She broke the embrace and went forwards to what I presumed was the cockpit.

I looked at the man. He was regarding me with no expression. The last time I had seen him we had been in the stone porch of the basilica.

‘I recollect shooting you,’ Lightburn said.

The man nodded.

‘You did. Not very effectively, it seems.’

Lightburn shrugged.

‘You did what you had to do,’ the man said. ‘I bear no grudge. You were protecting her.’

He looked at me.

‘Many people seem hell-bent on protecting me,’ I said. ‘Sister Bismillah is the only stable point I’ve known in my life and now I discover she’s... Medea, was it?’

‘Medea Betancore,’ said the man. ‘My pilot, my oldest friend. An Inquisitorial agent of very long standing. She gave up the last two decades of her life to watch over you, girl.’

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

He reached into his heavy coat, wearily pulled out a leather wallet and

opened it to show me the ornate rosette within.  
'I am Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn,' he said.

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# CHAPTER 37

## *Interrogator*

I walked over and sat down at the table facing him.

‘What is my life to you?’ I asked.

‘I value it,’ he said.

‘Why? Because I am an operative of the Holy Ordos?’

He shrugged.

‘You represent a direct connection to someone I once cared for,’ he said. ‘It is a connection I never expected to discover. My team came to Sancour years ago, attempting to infiltrate what we believed to be a heretical coven. Medea was taking point in the field, and discovered you. We altered our plans so we could watch you.’

‘Why?’

‘To protect you,’ he said.

‘As an asset to the Inquisition?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And as a key to opening a vast and treacherous conspiracy. But also, as the living legacy of a lost soul.’

‘Who was that, inquisitor?’

He paused before replying.

‘Her name was Alizebeth Bequin,’ he said. ‘I lost her... many years ago. She was, in effect, your mother. You were... manufactured from her genetic material.’

‘A clone?’ I asked.

He shrugged again.

‘You are her daughter, technically, because you are not identical to her. Not genetically identical. However, you are quite remarkably similar to

her.'

'Your face shows no emotion, sir,' I said. I had been trying hard to read it.

'That's right,' he said. 'It doesn't any more.'

'But the timbre and pitch of your voice,' I said, 'and some of your micro-subtle body language does. I see sadness. Regret. What was she to you, this woman?'

'A friend,' he said.

'More than that?'

'Perhaps. She was also a blank, a carrier of the pariah gene. That is why her genetic material was used in your manufacture. As an untouchable, she served the Inquisition at my side as an outstanding operative.'

'What happened to her?'

'Just a variation on what happens to us all eventually.'

A man came into the cabin space from the direction of the cockpit. Lightburn and Lucrea had taken seats nervously on a wall bench, and regarded him cautiously.

'I see we've got her at last,' he said.

'I believe you've met Harlon Nayl,' said Eisenhorn.

'Yeah, we've met,' Nayl said, glowering at me somewhat. 'I met her, saved her life, she left me in the lurch to deal with certain death...'

'If you had identified yourself as a servant of the Inquisition,' I began. I looked at Eisenhorn. 'Or if *you* had...'

Nayl glanced at Eisenhorn.

'Do we do that still?' he asked.

'When it's useful,' Eisenhorn replied.

'I'll bear that in mind,' said Nayl.

'Sister Bismillah,' I said, 'told me that another agent of the Inquisition, a Sister Tharpe, led the attack on the Maze Undue. Her real name, I believe, was Patience. Why would that be the case? Why would the Inquisition raid an Inquisition facility?'

The man Nayl looked unhappy and reluctant to answer.

'Lines of demarcation are difficult to draw clearly sometimes,' said Eisenhorn. 'There are many factions on either side. Patience Kys was following the orders of a man who believed that the Maze Undue was a compromised facility.'

'Do you believe that?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, 'but not to the same degree, and my approach to dealing

with it would have been rather different. For more than twenty years we have been following this case. In prosecution, it requires infinite patience, and not the kind of *patience* this man used. You need to see the long game, to appreciate how only the most careful long-term strategy can result in a truly worthwhile achievement. The Maze Undue was simply a door that led to something far greater, a vast conspiracy. Attacking that door simply ensured it would be closed.'

'Are the Cognitae behind the door?' I asked.

Eisenhorn and Nayl exchanged glances. There was an amused look on Nayl's face.

'They are,' said Eisenhorn. 'You surprise me.'

'I notice things.'

'Clearly,' said Nayl.

'Had the Cognitae compromised the Maze Undue?'

'No,' said Nayl. 'They built the damn place.'

I thought about that. It came as no surprise.

'We were always told we were in training to serve the Inquisition,' I said.

'Of course you were,' said Nayl. 'It's easier to explain to ambitious young minds.'

'I knew, though,' I said. 'I suspected. A man came. This was a year and some ago. They said he was Cognitae come to kill us, but he had a rosette. His name on that was Voriet, an interrogator.'

'Did they kill him?' asked Nayl.

'Yes, I saw it done.'

Nayl looked at Eisenhorn. 'That was when Talon started his investigation on Sancour. Voriet was one of his team. That's where this mess started to gain traction.'

'Who is Talon?' I asked.

'My rival,' said Eisenhorn. 'His approach to this is rather different, as I said. He has come to it lately, and with much more urgency. He is not prepared to wait and see what might develop. His people took down the Maze Undue. He seeks to locate and stop the graels.'

'Because they are weapons of the King?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said. He nodded. 'Good.'

'And what do you want?' I asked. 'No, wait. I can guess. You don't want the graels. You want the King.'

Nayl snorted.

‘I do,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘That’s the point. There’s no point hunting for the small fish. It simply allows the big one to swim away. I want the King in Yellow. I want Orphaeus.’

‘For a while, you know,’ I said, ‘I thought *you* were Orphaeus.’

That made Nayl burst out laughing.

‘Why would you think that?’ asked Eisenhorn.

‘I saw what you did to the Word Bearer,’ I said. ‘You’re not normal.’

‘Stop it,’ Nayl protested, flapping a hand. ‘I’ll wet myself.’

‘What do you want from me?’ I asked Eisenhorn.

‘I want to make sure you’re safe,’ he said.

‘Because of the bond you feel towards my mother? Some duty? Some debt?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘What else?’ asked Lightburn.

We all looked at him.

‘Well, there’s always something else,’ he said.

‘I want you to help me,’ Eisenhorn said to me. ‘I want to recruit you. You are the key to the puzzle. My rival has vast resources at his disposal, many agents and operatives. My options are rather more modest. I have just five operatives. You’ll meet them all. If I am going to win this, and achieve a true victory over heresy, I need to move before Talon blunders in and ruins it all. So I need an advantage. That’s you.’

He looked at me. In many ways, his expressionless face was as chilling as Teke’s constant smile.

‘I want you to help me defeat the King,’ he said.

# CHAPTER 38

## *Bifrost*

We flew into the morning and back across the southern limits of Queen Mab. It was a dull, hazy day. Under Medea's steady hand – I confess I could not think of her as Medea yet, though I also could not reconcile the idea of Sister Bismillah piloting a gun-cutter – we flew through the low cloud, past the great cooling towers of the Farek Tang manufactories, and settled on a rooftop landing platform in the Talltown district west of Feygate.

These were old and weather-beaten buildings, all of dressed grey stone and wrought iron, most of great height and architectural complexity. Talltown had once been one of the finer and more respectable parts of the city, but chemical outfall from the manufactory plants had stained it and spoiled its looks. It was a dignified area, haggard but noble, like a proud old man whose life has been lived full. The jumble of rooftops, zinc gutters, ridge-lines, aerial masts, cables, tin chimneys and tar-paper slopes formed a second landscape far above the ground.

The landing platform served a particular building called Bifrost that Eisenhower seemed to own or lease. We went in through a scruffy roof dock, and I found the place old, but clean enough. It lacked character. The walls were white-washed and the floors tiled. There was some old furniture. It felt rented. It felt borrowed from previous users.

Medea showed us to rooms where we could rest. I was ready to sleep, though I was boiling over with questions. I knew that rest would make the asking of those questions, and the import of the answers I received, more effective.

Lightburn stopped me as I was going to my room.

‘What happens now?’ he asked quietly, watching to make sure we were not being overheard. ‘I do not trust these people any more than any others.’

‘I trust Medea,’ I said.

‘I think that may be a mistake,’ he frowned. ‘As far as I can tell, she’s done nothing but lie to you for twenty years.’

‘It was her function,’ I said.

‘And mine was to fetch you back to Eusebe. That’s my burden. I’ve been trying to do that from the very start, and I’ve been thwarted too often. As far as I’m concerned, that’s what I must do. The people you come from, surely they’re the ones you should trust most?’

I considered this. The Curst made a certain facile sense, but I felt he simply did not understand the complexity of things. My world had become a place of interlocking identities, of falsehoods, of lies slipped inside truths and of truths locked inside lies. Agendas overlapped, and I did not yet know which I should share and which I should oppose. Sister Bismillah, Medea, had indeed lied to me for twenty years or more, but I felt she had done so for good reason and from a genuine sense of care. Mam Mordaunt and the Maze Undue had cared for me for almost as long, and I felt a habituated loyalty to them, but perhaps that was the more false. They had been raising me for a purpose, like a cash crop. Their apparent care and investment had been selfish.

Had they intended to make one of their graels out of me, I wondered? Would I have served the King and become one of the Eight? Would a blind, white spider have been encouraged to weave its web-nest in my gullet? Would I have liked that? Would I have fought it?

I believe I would have. I had always thought of myself as a true Imperial servant and a staunch warrior of the Inquisition. If I had been made by the Cognitae, they had not conditioned me to think so. The idea that I was heretic, polluted Cognitae was revolting to me. If they had confronted me with that truth, I would have rejected it.

I think I would have.

I slept on this thought.

When I awoke, it was late afternoon. I hadn’t dreamed. Exhaustion had simply carried me through the hours like a dark river through lightless woods.

Medea had left out fresh clothes for me. I showered in a small, leaky cubicle and put on a blue bodyglove, boots and a worn leather coat. Into the pockets I placed the bent silver pin and the little blue commonplace book, which I had taken back from Renner.

I went down several flights of stairs and found Eisenhower in a day room, reading data-slates, while Medea sat by a window, drinking caffeine and poring over street maps.

I fetched myself some caffeine from the pot on the stove, and sat down facing Eisenhower. Here, in the daylight flooding the high room, and the calm away from strife, I could see that he was a noble man, and powerful. I could also see that a long life, perhaps over-long, had treated him cruelly. He was worn and broken, tired and long-suffering, held together by augmetics and calipers. I wondered if he had chosen Talltown as a lair because its character matched his own.

‘You want to catch the King?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Why?’ I asked.

He looked at Medea, who had stopped her work to listen, and she smiled.

‘That’s a good question,’ she said.

‘It’s the question no one asks,’ said Eisenhower.

‘Because?’ I asked.

‘Because the King in Yellow is a creature of myth,’ he replied. ‘He is folklore. A version of him has existed for centuries, perhaps even longer. The point is, the question can’t be answered in any satisfactory way, because we don’t know enough about him. We don’t know who he is, or what he is; we don’t know his purpose or ambition at all, except that it concerns the immaterium.’

‘So?’ I asked.

‘I’ll reduce it to simple terms,’ Eisenhower said. ‘Whatever he’s doing, whatever his intent, I know he is not doing it with the authority or approval of the Imperium. He is outside the law as we know it. That means he is operating against the spirit of the Imperium of Mankind, and by extension against the Emperor. On that basis alone, I need to find him and stop him. On that basis alone, he may be considered heretic.’

‘And that’s enough for you?’ I asked.

‘It should be enough for any servant of the Ordos,’ he said.

‘What of the Cognitae?’ I asked. ‘Tell me of them.’

‘They are a secret society,’ said Eisenhower. ‘A secret order. Vastly clever, vastly knowledgeable, and possibly vastly old. The Cognitae may pre-date the Imperium. It may even run back into Old Terran history, to before the Unification. It may be the oldest institution known to the human species.’

‘But you don’t believe that?’ I asked.

He scratched the side of his neck.

‘I think it’s more likely to be a repeated re-use and repurposing of an old name. There may have been something called the Cognitae once, way back before the Unification. In the ten thousand years since then, other groups and orders have discovered the name, claimed it for their own ends, and pretended to carry the flame. I think the Cognitae has been thousands of different cults down the years, sometimes even cults at war with each other. I don’t doubt that if you made a search, you’d find dozens of fraternities throughout human space who claim to be the true Cognitae. It’s not likely that one secret body could have endured so long.’

‘The Imperium has,’ I said.

‘Rather different,’ he said. ‘If nothing else, because it is driven by the undying will of the Emperor. There is nothing to give the Cognitae such continuity.’

He looked at me.

‘In simple terms,’ he said, ‘the Cognitae today is best thought of as a kind of counter-Inquisition, a shadow version. Their operations, actions and goals are very similar to ours, except they do not operate in the Emperor’s name.’

‘So they are another shadow-twin, like the City of Dust. A hidden and opposing half?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘And like me too, I suppose,’ I said. ‘A covert version of something – *someone* – else?’

‘I suppose so,’ he admitted.

‘I want to help you,’ I said. ‘I think I can get you close to the King. If I am what you say I am, then I am a valuable instrument. He will want me returned for his use. He invested time in making me, after all. I think you should let me be what he wants me to be. Then I can lead you to him.’

He nodded.

‘That is a sound suggestion,’ he said.

‘A dangerous one,’ warned Medea. I loved her for the concern she could



not help but show.

‘Yes, but sound,’ countered Eisenhower. ‘As a long-term plan, that is valid and we—’

I stopped him.

‘I appreciate what you were saying last night about patience and long-term strategy, but we have an opportunity that we must seize before it vanishes. It may already be too late.’

Medea got up and came over to listen. Eisenhower signalled for me to go on.

‘I know we must not rush into things,’ I said, ‘and I know you prize the long game, but I have a chance to reconnect to the Cognitae of the Maze Undue and be returned to the fold. Another week, another few days even, and that chance will go. I need to move quickly to keep the door open.’

‘I don’t like it,’ said Medea.

‘Neither do I,’ said Eisenhower. ‘But let’s hear her out.’

It was agreed. At the end of the day, Eisenhower would allow the Curst to escort me to the rendezvous.

‘Can we not force the location out of him?’ asked Nayl, who struck me as a man who always thought it best to force whatever was needed out of things.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Think of it as a function, Mr Nayl. The Cognitae sent Lightburn to recover me. They will expect to see him if I come back to them. He has become part of my role.’

‘But can we trust him?’ asked Nayl.

‘I trust him,’ I said. ‘He has taken this duty upon himself out of some sense of penitence, and he has never failed to come back for me. He is quite dogged, and he has faced much that would have caused a lesser man to desert his duty.’

Nayl shrugged.

‘He exhibits a fortitude and a devotion that I find impressive,’ said Eisenhower.

That it seemed, was enough for Nayl and Medea.

‘Do you know what he did to become Curst, this Lightburn?’ asked Nayl.

‘He has never told me,’ I replied. ‘He has never told anyone, I think.’

Nayl took me to the Bifrost armoury, a reinforced room on the tenth floor that I think had once been a gymnasium. There was an impressive array of

blade, las and hard round ordnance stacked in boxes, crates, cases and cartons, or wrapped in oil cloth.

He found me a good laslock pistol, and a rugged little snub auto to use as a hold out. Both were in very good order, but old and apparently battered enough for it to be credible I had obtained them on the street.

‘Do you have a blade?’ He asked.

‘I have this,’ I said, producing the silver pin.

He took it from me and looked at it for a long time.

‘This belonged to Kys,’ he said. ‘It was one of her kine blades.’

‘You knew her?’

He nodded.

‘Medea said you... killed her,’ he said, without looking up at me. There was a slight break in his voice.

‘It was self-defence,’ I said. ‘She attacked the Maze Undue. She attacked me. I thought she was an assassin sent by the Cognitae. It was self-defence. I said that, didn’t I? I’m sorry. How did you know her?’

He tapped the bent silver pin against his open palm.

‘We served together, under Talon,’ he said quietly. ‘Talon was Eisenhower’s interrogator, in the very early days. Talon and I were members of the warband in one of its first iterations. Then Talon was promoted to full rank, and established a warband of his own. I joined it. Eisenhower had retreated into semi-retirement at that period. Kys and me, we served together for a long time. Saved each other’s lives more than once.’

I felt suddenly and terribly ashamed of my deeds.

‘I’m sorry, Nayl,’ I said.

He shook his head.

‘Death comes. Death walks with you,’ he said. ‘You can’t ever know when it will tap you on the shoulder. Kys was always fierce, always rash. That’s what I loved about her.’

‘Were you—?’

‘Me and Patience? Throne, no,’ he said. ‘I’d have had a better chance with Kara.’

‘Who?’

‘Doesn’t matter. The point is, fierce was Patience Kys’ thing. She knew the score. She made her choice. You weren’t to know. I’m actually a little impressed you out-did her.’

He looked at me.

‘She was actually a lot like you, you know, Beta,’ he said. ‘An orphan, raised in a cruel parody of an orphans’ school to become something she was not. She finally broke out and ended up serving the Holy Ordos. She would have felt a bond with you.’

He handed the pin back to me.

‘Keep it,’ he said. ‘I’ll find you a proper blade too. Keep that thing to remind you how tough it is to come from what you’ve come from.’

I put the silver pin back in my pocket. He started to sort through a collection of daggers and fighting knives.

‘Why did you rejoin Eisenhorn’s crew if you had served with this Talon?’ I asked.

‘There was a big operation,’ he said. ‘This would be back in, what, 404? Talon moved against a heretic called Molotch. Funny thing, this Molotch was the product of a Cognitae breeding programme. Anyway, it ended up on Gudrun. A place called Elmingard, in the Kell Mountains. It isn’t there any more.’

‘Elmingard or the Kell Mountains?’ I asked, amused.

‘Neither,’ he said. ‘Talon stopped Molotch, but there was major collateral. Talon had to play fast and loose for a while to get close to the bastard. He’d almost gone rogue. What with that and the mess left afterwards, Talon went to trial for misconduct. Palace of the Inquisition, the whole thing. They couldn’t properly condemn him, because he’d saved half the damn subsector, but they retired him from active service, just to make sure no other mavericks got funny ideas. So, the band broke up. I went freelance for a while, a long while. Then I heard Eisenhorn was recruiting again. Eisenhorn’s always been a fringe player, you see. He’s not well liked by the higher-ups. Bit of a loner. So he can’t call on serious resources any more. Just old friends. He got Medea too. He knew we couldn’t say no. This was about 450. He was already chasing the Yellow King by then.’

‘That was over fifty years ago,’ I said, surprised.

He handed me a twin-edged *glevil* to try for weight.

‘Then I’ve been in the ground for fifty years,’ he said. ‘I staged my death around that time so I could rejoin his crew and not bring my past with me. A few years after that, Medea “disappeared” too. Left her family business on Glavia and rejoined the old firm. I guess we’ll be with him to the *actual* death now.’

‘He said there were two other members of the team,’ I said.

‘There are,’ he said. ‘You’ll meet them. They’re specialists.’

‘Why is Talon active again if he retired to desk duties all those years ago?’ I asked.

Nayl shrugged, and handed me a hand-long *ferichute* to try instead.

‘I guess he got bored writing books,’ he said.

I didn’t understand.

He made a ‘never mind’ gesture.

‘I imagine the real reason is that he’s on to the King too. Talon’s got a hell of a mind. A hell of a mind. Smartest man I ever met, all due respect to the old boy. He’s on to the King and he thinks it’s important. That’s what’s got him a pass back into the field. That’s why he’s moving with so much haste and fury.’

He balanced an inlaid *severaka* in his hand, and flipped it a couple of times.

‘The King must be a serious thing,’ he said. ‘Eisenhorn thinks so. Talon thinks so. The Inquisition thinks so, because they’ve let Talon off the leash to get him, and they know that the last time they did that it kind of left a big dent in Gudrun.’

He handed me the *severaka*.

‘This’ll do you,’ he said.

‘Good choice,’ I said.

The battered, peeling door of the old gymnasium opened, and Medea came in.

‘You’re taking ages,’ she said.

‘What can I say?’ said Nayl. ‘The girl’s picky, like her mother.’

‘You all knew her, didn’t you?’ I asked.

‘Why do you think we have taken so much effort with you?’ asked Medea.

‘We knew her, loved her, mourned her,’ said Nayl.

‘What happened to her?’ I asked.

‘She got hurt,’ said Nayl. ‘Brain dead. It was bad. We put her in stasis, in the hope that one day...’

‘And?’

‘The stasis tube holding her was kept aboard a ship,’ said Medea. ‘The ship went missing, lost, during a routine jump, about 460.’

‘461,’ said Nayl.

‘I guess someone must have found it after all,’ said Medea.

‘Do you have any picts of her?’ I asked.

‘Not any more,’ said Medea. ‘It was a long time ago.’

‘The boss might have some,’ Nayl said.

‘I wouldn’t ask him,’ said Medea to me. ‘In time, he’ll show you if he feels he can. It’s a sensitive issue.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘He loved her,’ said Nayl. ‘As much as he can love anyone. Losing her would have broken his heart... if he’d ever had one.’

‘If you want to know what she looked like,’ said Medea with a smile, ‘go look in a mirror.’

It was getting late in the day. We said an unsentimental goodbye. I had memorised contact codes. Carrying an actual vox seemed counter to the spirit of my role. It would raise questions.

‘My specialists will shadow you,’ said Eisenhower.

I nodded.

‘I still haven’t met them,’ I said.

‘Probably better for your cover if you haven’t,’ said Eisenhower.

‘We will wait for you to break silence,’ he added.

‘But try not to make us fret,’ said Medea. She hugged me.

‘Look after Lucrea while I’m gone,’ I said.

She nodded.

Lightburn and I left by one of the upper hatches, and made off across the jumbled landscape of the Talldown roofs as the sun began to set.

# CHAPTER 39

## *The burdener's tale*

‘Will you tell me where we’re going?’ I asked Lightburn.

‘If I haven’t so far, I won’t hardly do it now, will I?’ he replied.

‘You take your burden very seriously, Curst,’ I said.

Lightburn nodded.

‘I cannot shrive away my burden of sins if I take things on that I do not do precisely as they have been asked for. That’s just sloppy. The lady, she told me not to tell anyone her place, but to bring you to her. My burden won’t ease if I can’t do things correct.’

We were heading east, towards Feygate. It was a close evening, but there was a threat of rain. The sky was still stained from the fire at the basilica. We left the rooftops level by level, following slopes and wall-tops, pipes and embankments, and by the time the huge grey shape of Feygate loomed ahead of us, we were at street level, cutting through the alleys and sub-habs of an area called the Salleys. It was not busy. We were walking comfortably, but on our guard for knife gangs and street chancers.

‘What was your sin, Renner?’ I asked.

He did not reply.

‘Will you not tell me?’

‘I worked the temple,’ he said quietly. ‘The basilica, like you guessed. I was a temple guard. A warden. I was a dutiful man. I served at the blessing of the Golden Throne.’

He fell silent. I did not press him. We walked on through the dingy lanes and hab courts. I waited for him to resume.

‘One night, this person come to the temple,’ he said. ‘I was on duty. This

person, she wanted sanctuary. There was a mob chasing after her. Hunting her.'

'It was a she? A girl?'

He nodded.

'Young thing, she was. Frightened. I thought she might be a harlot or a happy-girl who had offended some customer or caused some scandal. I thought the mob was pompous-minded arses, chasing her down to beat her and thrash her. But she was not.'

'No?'

He shook his head.

'She was psykana,' he said. 'She'd never been picked up or tested. Just grew up not knowing. That week, her power had come out. Her age, I suppose. Just the age she was, making her grow into it. Anyway, her psychomagic was manifesting, scaring her, scaring her family and neighbours. She had run. They had hunted her.'

He looked at me.

'She was so scared, Beta. So very scared. Scared of the mob, scared of what would happen, scared of herself. She only wanted someone to help her. So I gave her sanctuary. I let her into the crypts and gave her sanctuary there.'

He fell silent.

'What happened?' I asked.

He sighed.

'The confessors found us. I was kicked out, banished. I was made a sinner, and cursed to be a burdener.'

'And her?'

'I think they burned her the next holy day.'

We walked on, through gathering shadows, through the dark places of the city.

'Is that why you are helping me, Renner?' I asked.

'Is what why?'

'I am a pariah too. Are you helping me so diligently because you couldn't help her?'

He snorted.

'Rubbish!' he declared. He laughed as though the very notion was riotously funny.

'You're just my burden, you are,' he said. 'And soon the weight of you

will be off me.'

We went deeper into the Salleys, moving north towards the Undergate district. The amber light from the smelteries on Emberyard lit the night sky. A couple of times, purse gangs had tailed us, but lost interest when they saw the imposing mass of Lightburn.

He caught my arm and stopped.

'You hear that?' he asked.

'What?'

'You feel that?'

'Just the wind,' I said. 'It's getting up. Rain is coming.'

'I'm not so sure,' he said. 'For a few streets now, I've had the feeling we're being followed.'

'Yes, the yard gangs,' I said.

'No, not the yard gangs and chancers,' he replied. 'I know what it feels like to be tailed by them. Something else.'

'I didn't feel anything,' I said.

It started to rain suddenly. The drops fell fast and heavy. Then it became a really fierce downpour. The water frothing in the gutters was black with street muck. Thunder rolled.

We ran for shelter in the mouldering arch of an old building. We stood, peering out into the curtain of rain.

'I hope this lets up, or we'll be soaked,' he said.

I nodded. I wondered how much further we had to go.

'Holy Throne,' he murmured, very quietly. 'Beta, look.'

I looked. A handful of tiny, bright objects were floating down the rainwater brook that had formed in the street gutter beyond the arch, bouncing and swirling on their way to the culvert.

They were pink rose petals.

'Oh no,' I said.

We turned to run.

A gleaming smile hung in the rain behind us.



# CHAPTER 40

*Eusebe*

Teke the Smiling One stepped out of the darkness so we could see him. The rain streamed off his pink and black armour. His two gold ribbons fluttered from his hip.

‘I have been looking for you,’ he said. He held up Shadrake’s sighting glass like a lorgnette. It had a crack in it where I had dropped it. ‘I have been looking for you for a while. You left me at Feverfugue. You hurt me with *that word*. I had to fight those animals. *Fight* them. They cut me. I hurt them back.’

He looked at me.

‘I thought we had an understanding, Mamzel Beta Bequin,’ he said. ‘I thought you understood that you belong to the Children now.’

‘Please...’ I began.

‘You belong to the Children. I have come to take you back so that we can continue our business together.’

Still smiling, he raised a warning finger.

‘No bad words now. No pariah tricks. Come with me. Or I will kill him and maim you.’

I truly wished I had the word, but since I had said it to him in the ancient house, it had fled from my memory again and could not be recovered.

He took a step towards us. He reached out his hand to me. Where the rain ran off his gleaming armour it looked like blood.

Lightburn snatched out his revolver and aimed it at Teke.

‘Renner, don’t!’ I cried. ‘He will kill you.’

‘If I don’t, I’d better just kill myself!’ Renner snarled back.

‘Would you do that?’ asked Teke. ‘Could you? Save me the effort?’

Then Teke vanished. Something smashed into him from the side and ripped him out of our line of sight. It was as though he had been ploughed down by a runaway tram. Lightburn and I flinched at the impact and ran to look.

Deathrow the warblind had the monster on the ground, his hands around Teke’s throat. Deathrow was almost as big as the warrior of the Emperor’s Children. He was systematically bashing the Traitor Marine’s head against the pavement of the filthy slum alley. Rain hosed down over them both. I heard the buzz of his optic visor.

Teke rallied and smashed the warblind off him with a formidable punch. The impact of powered fist on plate armour made a sound like a safe door slamming. Deathrow left the ground and smashed into the wall behind him, cracking ancient, soot-frail bricks.

Teke was up, rushing the warblind. His ribbons were swords. His smile became a killing rictus.

The cattle dog bounded out of the side street and stormed into him, seizing his left wrist in its massive jaws. The warrior of the Emperor’s Children howled out in dismay. It was not a cry of pain. He simply seemed revolted at the thought of being touched by a vermin dog. He lashed out and sent the animal flying across the yard.

But the dog had bought Deathrow time. The killgang chief had drawn his oil-dark broadsword. He came at Teke and they clashed. The huge, oiled blade met and blocked both of the darting golden longswords. Sparks flew. I heard both warriors grunt with effort as they traded potentially lethal strokes and thrusts. Teke had the clear advantage. The killgang chief was supernaturally strong. I knew this well enough. But he was not in the same class as the Traitor Astartes. Teke would kill him. He would outstroke and outfight him. His swordsmanship was far greater.

The Smiling One landed a terrible, scouring blow that seemed to rip part of Deathrow’s visor and face-plating away. Deathrow’s head snapped to the side. I saw fluids spurt into the rain. Cables tore out and fizzled. Deathrow staggered backwards, leaking blood, the side of his head mangled.

Teke closed for the kill.

But he paused. He had seen something. Something had stopped him in his tracks.

I realised he had glimpsed Deathrow’s face behind the ruptured visor.

‘How—?’ he began.

The distraction was momentary, but the Smiling One had dropped his guard.

Deathrow plunged his sword into the gap. The oiled black blade went through the Traitor Marine’s belly and shredded out through the back plating of his armour. Blood splattered onto the wet pavement behind him, black as pitch. Shorn servos shorted out.

Teke screamed. This time it truly was pain. It was pain and outrage and horror.

Teke tore himself off the blade impaling him, and lurched back across the yard. Black blood was gushing from his wound and mingling with the rain. His face was ashen. He was still smiling.

He turned, and the night took him. It was as if the blackness and the rain had conspired to become a curtain to allow his exit. Teke left no trace behind but a few pink rose petals floating on the gurgling pools around the drain.

Deathrow sank to his knees, breathing hard. He kept his back to us. He raised his hands to his face and tried to push his damaged visor back together.

I took a step towards him. The cattle dog trotted up and stood between us. It glared at me, but not unkindly.

‘Deathrow?’ I said.

The dog growled. *Beta*.

‘Can I help? You are hurt. Let me...’

The dog growled again. A negative.

‘You saved us. You saved me again.’

The dog remained silent.

‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance this day,’ I said.

I looked at Lightburn. He gestured urgently at me to follow and get away.

I stopped and looked back at Deathrow.

‘You’re one of his, aren’t you?’ I said. ‘You’re one of Eisenhower’s specialists. He sent you to shadow me.’

There was no answer.

‘Didn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ said Deathrow.

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

He rose to his feet and turned to look at me. I saw that the visor was

smashed and hanging off, and part of the scarred and ridged tissue of his face was torn away. But it was a mask. There was another face beneath it, a face that Teke's blow had partially exposed.

I could not see it clearly, but even in the gloom I could tell that it was handsome and noble.

'Who are you?' I asked.

He looked at me for a moment.

'I am Alpharius,' he said.

He turned, and he and his dog were quickly lost in the downpour.

It continued to rain, but we carried on walking. We cared about only one kind of shelter. I began to regret the very essence of my life. I felt I should walk down to the marshlands where, allegedly, I had come from, and lie down upon the wet grave that I had been told belonged to my mother, and die there. Just lie there and let the elements claim me so I could stop being the centre of this madness. I had become a grail. I had become the thing all these various, lethal parties were questing for. In all the grail myths, I wondered if anyone had ever given a second thought to how the grail felt about it all.

The oblivion appealed, but it was based on a lie too. The fact of me coming from the marshlands and the shipyards south of Toilgate was just a useful story that had been concocted to make my life make sense. It was just a role. My mother, if I could believe Eisenhower's retainers, had been lost on a ship in the warp. Only my name seemed genuine. Bequin: just a word. A single word was all I had been left with.

We walked for an hour more, and did not speak. The rain plastered our clothes to our skins. The city seemed empty, for the rain had driven most residents indoors. It felt like the lights had been switched off and the stone jumble of it had been evacuated so it could be hosed clean ready for the morning. For the next set of actors and roles to play out.

Lightburn led me across Lunar Street, the great boulevard running through Parashoy district, and up towards Coalgate. He had taken me the long way round. The trees behind the black railings in Parashoy Park whispered in the heavy rain.

'Here we are,' he said.

We crossed the thoroughfare, past shuttered commercial properties and a tavern that was lit within. Across a cobbled yard lay a large, old building. It

had been built in the classic Orphaeonic style, with columns and a portico. Its windows were blind. It had long been disused. Dirt caked it and chains held its doors shut. It was a dead place. It was a blind box that contained unknown contents.

‘Here?’ I asked.

He nodded, and we approached the doors, moving up the worn steps and under the portico. Rain dripped from the stone frieze. It smelled of damp and the garbage nests of vagrants.

Lightburn went to the doors and pulled away the rusted chains that trapped the handles. He shoulder-shoved one of the doors open, a bit at a time, until there was enough room to climb through.

It had been a hospital once, a teaching hospital for the College Medicae. It had been closed for perhaps sixty years. We passed through a gloomy hallway and into a large, tiled chamber littered with old, mouldering textbooks and scattered pages of patient records. On two of the huge walls hung thousands of group pics, each one a graduating class of young medicae students. The pics had become so stained one could no longer make out the faces. There were three banks of rotting chairs. I wasn’t sure if they had been a waiting area, or were arranged for an audience to sit in while degrees were bestowed.

Lightburn walked along one wall, counting off the stone urns that stood there. He got to the fourth, reached in, and pulled out a small tracker unit.

‘This is how I tell her we’re here,’ he said, and activated it. A green light on the little unit began to flash excitedly.

‘How long?’ I asked.

‘You know as much as I do now,’ he said.

We waited. It was uncomfortably dark and damp. I heard the rain pattering on the roof, and heard the louder, clearer drops of water falling inside the place, through cracks onto tiled floors. I wondered how many lives had been saved by this building over the centuries. How many medicae had it trained and produced? How many lives had they gone out into the Imperium to change and save?

I wondered if, although in its dotage, the building might yet save my life.

I wondered what I would say to Mam Mordaunt when she arrived. I wondered who else of the Maze Undue had survived that terrible night. I realised I was excited at the thought of seeing them again. They were a life I understood. I wondered if this was simple familiarity, the promise of a

security that I had relied upon for so long. Or was it some insidious Cognitae conditioning, renewing my sense of loyalty as I anticipated seeing them?

Was I too much Cognitae? Was it my base nature? For all my declarations, was it likely that I would not renounce it when the time came?

I certainly had bargaining chips that would make me valuable to the Cognitae. I was an asset. I could tell them about at least two Inquisitorial operations, and some details of their composition and intent, and could tell them about Blackwards, about the Ecclesiarchy and their unwise pact with the Traitor Marines, about Alace Quatorze the erstwhile Glaw, the estimate nature of her house on the borderlands, and the malicious intent of the Emperor's Children.

During my flight, my *Hajara*, during my improvised escape back through previous functions and past roles, I had learned a great deal that I could use as leverage for my own security.

I began to pace. Lightburn watched me. He was nervous too.

I went to the door at the far end of the chamber and opened it. He followed me. On the other side was a spectacular room. It was the teaching hospital *teatro anatomica*, a steep chamber of six concentric circular viewing platforms with ornate nalwood balustrades that looked down on the operating station on the ground floor. Down there, where we stood, dissections and other demonstrations would have been made for the edification of the students packing the galleries above.

Water dripped from the roof. Bodies had been taken apart here in the name of science and for the furtherance of human knowledge. I was reminded that for all the lives the teaching hospital might have saved, it had been necessary to use lives up. People had died here too, and their anatomies had been consumed by science. Only from death may life continue. Only out of sacrifice can the future arise. Sometimes one must donate things that are very precious for the greater good.

After all the roles that I had been bred and trained to play, I could not help but notice how ironically appropriate it was that this reunion should take place in an empty theatre.

'She's here,' said Lightburn from just behind me.

I looked up and saw her coming down the wooden staircase from the galleries above us. I think I was expecting to hear the swish of expensive spider silk.

‘Renner, that’s not her,’ I said.

‘It is,’ the Curst insisted. ‘That is the woman who placed this burden upon me. That is the woman called Eusebe who told me to bring you here.’

It was not Eusebe Mordaunt. I drew my laslock and armed it. Lightburn looked at the weapon in confused dismay. Either he had tricked me, or he had been tricked, and from his look of surprise I suspected the latter.

The woman reached the ground floor and faced us.

‘Don’t come any closer,’ I warned, and aimed the laslock.

‘Or what?’ asked Patience Kys. ‘Will you kill me again?’

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# CHAPTER 41

*Which concerns the 41st Millennium*

She was beautiful, as beautiful as I remembered her from that night in the attics of the Maze Undue when I had known her only by the name Tharpe and the title Sister. She was tall, and her athletic form was sheathed in a fitted bodyglove of brown leather. Framed by the hard angles of her cheekbones, her green eyes burned with the fury of Deathrow's targeting optics. Her jet-black hair, black as Old Night, was held in a tight bun by a single silver pin.

'Put away your weapon, Beta Bequin,' she said. 'It's time to talk.'

'Is this not the woman?' Lightburn asked.

'No,' I snapped.

'I did not trick you, I swear!' he cried, most put out.

'I know,' I said.

Lightburn drew his revolver and took a step towards the woman.

'Why have you played me this way? You have used me!' he cried.

'Enough,' said Kys. 'Both of you put aside your guns. I am not joking, Beta. It is not an offer I usually extend to people who have tried to kill me.'

'How did you live?' I asked.

'He caught me.'

'He? Who?' I asked.

'My master.'

'How could he catch you? No man could stop a fall from so high.'

'He did it with his mind,' said Kys. 'You have no idea of the powers that are moving around you, have you? No idea. No idea of the league you suddenly find yourself in. For the last time, put away the guns.'



Her mention of mind-power jogged me out of my shock. Still aiming, I reached for my cuff. I could block her. I could blank her and her psykana master and—

The cuff would not turn.

Frantic, I fired instead. The shot went wild. The laslock pistol flew up out of my hand and somersaulted into one of the higher galleries. Lightburn's gun also made a premature exit from his grip. It went away through the air, spinning, the chamber cracking open and the bullets popping out one by one to orbit the floating gun like a clutch of moons around a parent planet.

Kys launched herself at me. I felt myself being lifted off my feet, as if a great wind had gathered up under me, or as if a giant hand had picked me up. I crashed back against the nalwood balustrade of the first gallery ring, pinned. I struggled, reaching for my blade or my hold-out piece. Both went flying away from me: found, removed and tossed aside by invisible fingers.

With a roar, Lightburn went for Kys, trying to intercept her. She shoved him back with her telekinetic force, dead set on me. When he picked himself up and went to come at her again, a second figure appeared, leaping down from the higher rails. It was another woman, shorter than Kys and more curvaceous, with short red hair. She landed like a cat and tackled the burdener. He fought her, but she blocked every one of his quick, angry swings and punches. She got his arm, turned him in a headlock, kicked away his legs and put him on the floor, pinned and helpless. He howled.

'Be quiet,' the woman told him.

Kys had reached me. I tried to fight her off, but she had me pressed against the wooden rails. I tried again and again to twist my cuff, to turn it off, to kill the limiter. It would not turn.

'Stop it,' said Kys. '*Stop it.*'

I fought.

'The first thing I did was lock that cuff tight with my mind,' said Kys. 'You think I want to be blanked by you again? You think I'd come to face you knowing you could block my mind?'

'Have you got her?' called the woman with her knee in Lightburn's spine.

'Yes,' said Kys. She looked at me, tilting her head to one side.

'Stop fighting. Things will go better for you.'

I snarled something.

'I can do this all day,' she said. 'You are detained as a prisoner of the Inquisition, and I suggest you accept that and start acting accordingly.'

Her mind reached into my coat. It plucked out the little blue commonplace book. Kys put out her hand and took the book from the air. She flicked through it.

‘Interesting,’ she said. ‘This seems to be an original copy of Chase’s lunatic jottings. A heretical text. Very rare. Where did you get it?’

I said nothing.

‘This is a dangerous book to own, Beta,’ she said. ‘It says a lot about the sort of person who would carry it around, and nothing good. This is a black mark as far as the Inquisition is concerned. A very black mark indeed. We may have to revise our appraisal of you.’

‘I was given it!’ I snapped. ‘I haven’t even read it! I don’t understand the cipher.’

She pursed her lips.

‘No one does,’ she remarked. ‘He’s been trying to unpick it for years. Of course, he hasn’t had an original to work from before. Maybe it’s a good sign that you can’t.’

Her mind reached into my pockets again, and pulled out the bent silver pin. She floated it up into the air between our faces and hovered it.

‘I’ve been missing this,’ she said. To demonstrate the sheer coercive power of her mind, she straightened the kink in the pin. Then she let it float up, rotate, and slide down into the chignon in perfect symmetry with the other pin.

‘Why did you keep it?’ she asked.

‘Why would you care?’ I replied.

‘He wants us,’ the other woman called out. ‘He’s calling for us.’

‘I heard,’ said Kys. She looked at me. ‘Are you going to behave?’ she asked. ‘You’ve no real reason to trust me, I know, but I want you to understand that things will go very much better for you if you cooperate. He’s tired. He will not have time for games.’

I nodded.

Her telekinetic grip on me relaxed slightly, enough for me to slide away from the balustrades pressing into my back and regain my feet on the floor. The redhead was scooping Lightburn to his feet, but keeping his arms pinned behind his back.

We started to walk towards the door. Kys was right at my shoulder, guiding me with her mind. Every time I walked even slightly contrary to her inclination, her mind tugged on me and set me straight. The redheaded

woman came after us, bundling Lightburn along like a rabble-rouser arrested by the city watch. The Curst kept saying, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'

'Can't you get him to shut up?' the redhead asked me.

'There's really been no evidence of it so far,' I replied.

They walked us back into the dank main hall, under the watching eyes of the rotting group pictures on the walls. A breeze flicked and fluttered at the papers scattered across the floor.

He was waiting there for us.

He was just a box, a great metal box, partly like a throne, and partly like an iron casket. Like Kys, he was just as I had encountered him that night. I wondered if the coffin/throne symbolism was deliberate: the seated, dead master, all-powerful, but helpless.

The box hovered above the floor, held up by its gravitic mechanisms.

Kys put me in front of him and let me stand free. The redhead stayed back with Lightburn in a restraint hold, though the Curst had stopped struggling at the sight of the sinister floating casket.

'You are Talon,' I said.

'You know me, then?' replied the box. It was speaking out of a mechanical vox-ponder built into its casing. The voice was not entirely human.

'Yes,' I said.

'I know you as Beta Bequin,' the box said. 'Is that your name?'

'Yes.'

'Alizebeth Bequin?'

'Yes.'

'You are an orphan raised in the Cognitae-run facility of the Maze Undue,' the box said. 'You never knew your mother?'

'No, I did not.'

'You are very like her,' he said.

'She really is,' said the redhead from behind us.

'Let that man go, Kara,' said the box. 'I don't think he'll trouble us. You won't trouble us, will you, Renner Lightburn?'

'No, sir,' said Lightburn. The redhead let his arms go. He straightened up and brushed his sleeves.

'That's good,' the box said. It hovered a little closer to me.

'You called me Talon,' the box said. 'It is one of my names. The best of all is this. I am Gideon Ravenor. I am an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos. Do you need to see my credentials to believe that?'

‘No,’ I said.

‘You have led a complicated life, Beta,’ the box said. ‘Very little of what has been in it so far is what it seems. You have been acting all this time. Rehearsing for roles. Now it is time for the performance.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I said.

‘It means that the Cognitae built you for a purpose, but you have much greater potential.’

I took a breath.

‘Are you asking me for my service?’ I asked. ‘Are you? Everyone seems to want something from me. Everyone. I seem to have so many uses. Will you have me infiltrate the Cognitae too?’

‘What do you mean “too”?’ asked the box.

‘I have been asked to do that already. I already serve the Inquisition, Gideon Ravenor.’

There was, for a moment, no sound except the steady drip of water through the cracks in the ceiling.

‘You mean Eisenhower,’ said the box.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘We were sure he had contacted you,’ said the box, ‘and presumably offered you a place in his retinue. He would find you useful. You are here on his business?’

‘On his authority,’ I replied, ‘the authority of the Inquisition, which I have spent my life believing I was serving. I suggest you talk to him. I know you are rivals, somehow. I do not pretend to understand your history. But you want the same thing.’

‘Which is?’ asked the box.

‘The Cognitae,’ I said. ‘And behind that, the King in Yellow. You both want the King.’

‘Has he told you why he hunts for the King?’ the box asked.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Would you like to know why *I* hunt for the King?’ it asked.

‘Yes. Tell me.’

‘Words and names are powerful things,’ the box said. ‘They give us control. They allow us to name, describe and subjugate the universe around us. The great written books of knowledge, the true grimoires and the codices, govern the very operation of this cosmos. There are books whose purpose is to end all life, and books made to create it. Words are power.’

“For a word was the very first thing”,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ the box agreed. ‘Just so. The Cognitae have made a particular quest, in my experience, of pursuing total power through words.’

‘So words are their grail?’ I said.

‘Yes. The words they seek are special. A special language. Constructive words. Destructive words.’

‘Enuncia,’ I said.

‘I’m impressed, yes,’ said the box. ‘Enuncia has long been one of their chief interests. They wish to gain the power to direct the whole of reality by the use of words alone.’

‘They’re not the only ones,’ I remarked.

‘Really?’ asked Kys. ‘What else do you know?’

I looked at the coffin-throne.

‘Finish what you were saying,’ I said.

‘It is my belief,’ the box said, ‘that the so-called King in Yellow is in pursuit of one word in particular. A word of vast power. If knowledge of a word conveys mastery of a thing or object or person, then this is the most potent of all. It will change everything we know.’

‘Just one word?’

‘I believe that the King has spent many decades extending his reach into, and control over, extimate space. He is gaining access, by diverse and indirect means, to the immaterium. There are various places within the inconstancy of the warp where the word might be found.’

‘Such as?’ I asked.

‘Such as,’ said the box, ‘a place called the Planet of the Sorcerers. A place called Echolalia. A place called Sicarus. A place called Grammatika. Other daemon worlds besides. Also, a place known as the Black Library.’

‘And what is this one word he is searching for so furiously?’ I asked.

The box paused before replying.

‘The one, true name of the God-Emperor,’ it said.

I heard Lightburn utter an outraged groan. He made the sign of the aquila across his breast.

‘For a man to know the name of the Emperor gives him power over the Emperor,’ said the box. ‘The power of life and death. And that power, by extension, means power over the Imperium and over all of mankind.’

‘So you want me to help you get to him?’ I asked. ‘You want me to help you stop him?’

‘Yes,’ said the box.

‘But in a very specific way,’ said Kys. ‘You have already made the connection, you simply have to exploit it. Just you being who you are makes you the perfect tool.’

‘I can’t believe we’re doing this,’ I heard the redhead murmur.

I looked at her.

‘It’s the only way, but it seems so cruel,’ she said.

‘Kara is quite correct on both counts,’ said the box. ‘I am very sad it has come to this.’

He moved closer towards me. I could hear the soft hum on his lifter plates. I could hear the tiny sound of his coffin’s life support.

‘The most exhaustive predictive searches and auguries have been unequivocal,’ the box said. ‘The threat lies within the Inquisition. Within the Ordos. It is among us and embedded in us. We must find it and cut it out. You say that a rivalry exists between me and Eisenhorn. It is more than that. Far more. He was once my master and my friend.’

There was a pause. The lifter plates hummed.

‘Gregor Eisenhorn is not an inquisitor. He does not serve the Ordos. He is a rogue and a heretic, and was named Extremis Diabolus nearly a century ago. He refuses to accept it. I have been charged by the elders of the Inquisition to return to active status and bring him down.’

‘No,’ I said.

‘You do not understand what he is, or what he is capable of,’ said the box.

‘And I don’t think you understand that you should talk to him,’ I replied. ‘You have misunderstood.’

‘Beta,’ said the box. ‘Under ordinary circumstances, I would be required to detain you forever, without hope of release. You are a pariah. You are the product of a heretic breeding programme. You are a more than valid target for suppression. But this is an extraordinary moment, and I have been given extraordinary powers. Because of what you are, because of who you are, you are the perfect agency with which to reach and bring down the heretic Eisenhorn.’

‘No!’ I said.

‘It is that or a life incarcerated,’ said Kys. ‘Sorry.’

‘I need you,’ said the box, ‘to use your connections to Eisenhorn, to exploit them, and to infiltrate his retinue. I need you to open up his entire operation, so I can bring him to justice at long last.’

‘You want me to befriend him and then betray him?’

‘I want you to serve the Emperor your god and do your duty in the name of the Inquisition,’ it replied.

‘He’s not the one you want!’ I cried. ‘He’s not the King!’

‘There is a very great possibility that he is,’ said the box. ‘And even if he isn’t, he must be stopped. He has been rogue for far too long.’

I started to protest loudly. Kys’ telekine force clamped my mouth shut.

Ravenor’s coffin-throne turn to face Kys and the redheaded woman.

‘Let’s give her time to reflect upon this offer,’ he said. ‘Kara, put her in one of the rooms upstairs. We’ll talk to her again in the morning. Kys, get rid of Mr Lightburn.’

‘Do I have to kill him?’ asked Kys. ‘He seems an honest man.’

‘No, don’t kill him,’ said the box. ‘Put a telekine spear through his cortex and blank out his short-term memory. Then dump him on the street. I don’t want him remembering anything about what has unfolded here.’

Lightburn cried out. He called out my name. Kys turned and escorted him away.

‘We will talk again,’ said Ravenor to me. ‘I hope you will consider what I have said. I look forward to working with you. I would be disappointed if you did not decide to.’

The coffin-throne turned and coasted away on its suspensors.

The redheaded woman walked over to me.

‘This way,’ she said. ‘Don’t give me any trouble.’

She led me down the hall and up a steep set of very dank stairs. Rainwater and slime had gathered in pools on the steps. Old carpet had rotted.

‘We’ll find you better accommodation tomorrow,’ she said, as if apologising. ‘This will have to do for tonight. He doesn’t tend to think much about physical comforts.’

I did not reply.

‘I want you to think very seriously about this when you’re alone,’ she said. ‘Please, Beta. You can help us. You can help the Imperium. You are being asked to make some very serious decisions about your future, and I don’t want you to make a mistake. Eisenhorn is dangerous. Very dangerous. He was my friend and I cannot side with him. Because of him, your poor mother died.’

We had reached an upper landing. A long, miserable corridor stretched

away from us. It was one of the old ward wings of the hospital, a line of individual rooms like cells. This level of the building was no less dirty, dark and rain-seeped than the floor below.

I looked at her.

‘My name is Kara Swole,’ she said. ‘I wish to the Throne we had met under better circumstances. I would have liked to know you properly.’

‘My mother died because of him?’ I asked.

‘She followed Eisenhower,’ said Kara Swole. ‘She was entirely loyal. But he had dabbled too far, and consorted badly, and had begun to exploit resources that no man should ever have touched. She died, Beta, simply because she stood at his side.’

‘What resources?’ I asked.

‘He harnessed daemons,’ she said.

‘That’s quite ridiculous!’ I replied. ‘I’ve spoken to him. He is strange, and he is powerful, but he is entirely sane and reasonable.’

‘Yes, he always seems to be, doesn’t he?’ she said. ‘I thought that about him for a long time. It is entirely his most dangerous aspect. When he speaks, even the most heretical ideas make sense.’

She opened the door to one of the rooms halfway along the hall. Inside there was a grotty bunk and a chair. The single window was barred inside and out by iron bands.

‘I’m sorry it’s not better,’ she said. ‘Sleep, think, reflect. By tomorrow, if you’re agreeable, we might be able to take you somewhere more pleasant and begin the process of briefing you.’

She left me in the small cell and closed the door. I heard it lock.

It was dark. A faint grey light came in through the barred window from the night outside, and that light was blurred and streaming by the rain. I sat down on the bed.

I had no idea what I would do. I had no notion who or what to trust. Just when I thought I was getting my bearings, the world inverted again.

I think I began to cry. I certainly sat thinking for a very long time. I doubted that the night would end.

‘Crying is good,’ said a voice.

I looked up.

‘Certain brain chemicals in tears relieve pain,’ the voice said. ‘So crying is good. That’s why you cry.’

I was not alone.



There was a man standing in the very corner of the room behind me, standing on the bed where it was pushed into the corner, just a pale figure in the deepest part of the shadows. He had not been there when I was locked in, I was sure of it, but I did not know how else he could have entered. The door was locked and the window was barred.

I leapt up and backed away from the bed. He stayed where he was, raised up above me by the height of the bunk. He was just a pale figure, a grey shade that vaguely resembled a man.

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘A friend.’

‘What sort of friend?’

‘A friend sent by a friend to help a friend,’ he said.

‘How did you get in here?’ I asked.

‘The same way as always,’ he said, doubtfully. ‘Was that a trick question?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘The real question is, how will I get you out of here?’ he said.

‘Did Eisenhower send you?’ I asked. ‘Did Eisenhower send you after me?’

‘Perhaps,’ the man said.

‘You’re the fifth member,’ I said, understanding. ‘The other specialist.’

‘Am I?’ asked the man. ‘Well, I suppose I am. It’s nice he thinks of me that way.’

He got down off the bed. Even in the more direct light of the window, he was still just a shade, a blur of twilight.

I heard footsteps running along the corridor outside. I heard the redheaded woman Kara bang on the door and call my name. She rattled the lock, but the door would not budge.

‘Oops,’ said the man. ‘Time to go. They’ve sensed me. We’d better leave.’

He raised his left hand and extended it towards the window. His hand began to glow softly with the most distressing light. It had no colour, but was all colours. It was a hue one could only mix up in a nightmare.

The bars inside and outside the window melted, and ran down the sill and wall like liquid tar. I heard them hiss and burn the wood and the floor. I could feel the heat and smell the scorching. The glass in the window turned to dust and blew away. Rain streamed in through the gap, turning to steam. More light flooded in now that the filthy window had evaporated.

The man turned to me.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

I didn't know what to say.

'That's better,' he said. 'Now there's a little more light, I can see you properly. You are a pretty one.'

Kara was banging frantically on the door. I could hear her yelling my name, but all I could look at was the man.

'Where are my manners?' he said. 'Hello, little thing. My name is Cherubael.'

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dan Abnett** has written over fifty novels, including *Anarch*, the latest instalment in the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series. He has also written the Ravenor, Eisenhorn and Bequin books, the most recent of which is *Penitent*. For the Horus Heresy, he is the author of the Siege of Terra novel *Saturnine*, as well as *Horus Rising*, *Legion*, *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He also scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous Black Library audio dramas. Many of his short stories have been collected into the volume *Lord of the Dark Millennium*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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An extract from *Penitent*.



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My dreams had become sticky and black since I met the daemon.

It had been two months since he first visited me, and his immaterial presence had seeped into my dreams like tar, gumming all of my thoughts together so that nothing was clear or separate any more. Just one fused lump of black confusion, wherein ideas writhed, enfeebled, unable to pull themselves free or define themselves.

I had hoped for clarity. I believe, in fact, that clarity was the thing I had been seeking my whole life. I wished I had met, instead, an angel, whose essence would have flooded my mind like amber. This was, I confess, utter fancy. I had never met an angel, and I did not know if they existed, but that is what I imagined. Where a daemon's touch might drown my dreams like dark ooze, an angel's would fill them with golden resin, so that each thought and idea might be preserved, alone and intact, quite clearly presented, and I could make sense of them. Of everything.

I had seen amber on the market stalls below Toilgate. That was how I knew of the stuff: polished pebbles in hues of ochre, gamboge and orpiment, resembling glass, and within each one a lace fly or burnished beetle, set fast for eternity.

That is how I wished my mind was: each thought presented thus, available to the light from all sides, so clear that one might examine every smallest detail through an enlarging glass.

But the daemon had welled in, and all was black.

I say daemon, but I was told the correct term is *daemonhost*. His name was Cherubael. This sounded to me like the name of an angel, but as with all things in the city of Queen Mab, things and their names do not agree. They are, ineluctably, ciphers for each other. Through my sticky, black dreams, I had come at least to understand that Queen Mab was a city of profound

contradiction. It was a place half-dead, or at least half-*other*, where one thing was in fact some opposite thing, and truth and lies interleaved, and people were not who they appeared to be, and even doors could not be trusted for, altogether quite too often, they opened between places that should not intersect.

The city was a dead thing inside a live thing, or the other way around. It was a place haunted by the ghost of itself, and few had the mediumship to negotiate between the two. The dead and the living questioned each other, but did not, or could not, listen to the answers. And those few who walked, aware, in the dark places between the two, the margin that divided the physical from the shadow it cast, seemed more concerned with consigning souls from one side to the other, sending the screaming living to their deaths, or plucking the purblind dead back to life.

Great Queen Mab and I had that in common. There was a dead-half part of me too, a silence within that made me pariah. I was a true citizen of Queen Mab, for I was a contradiction. I was shunned by all, an outcast orphan not fit for society, yet sought by all as a prize of some sort.

My name is Beta Bequin. Alizebeth was my given name, but no one called me that. Beta is a diminutive. It is said *Bay-tar*, with a long vowel, not *Better* or *Beater*, and I had always thought this was to distinguish it from the Eleniki letter that is commonly used in scientific ordinal notation. But now I began to think that was exactly what it was. I was Beta, the second on the list, the second version, the second-ranked, the lesser of two, the copy.

Or maybe not. Perhaps I was merely the next. Perhaps I was the alpha (though not, of course, the *Alpha* who stood with me in those days).

Perhaps, perhaps... *many* things. My name did not define me. That, at least, I learned from Cherubael, despite the gluey darkness of the dreams he spread. My name did not match me, just as his did not match him. We were both, like Queen Mab, contradictions from the outset. Names, as we will see, are infinitely untrustworthy, yet infinitely important.

I had become very sensitive to the distinction between what something is called and what it actually is. It had become my way, and I had learned it from the man Eisenhorn, who was by then, I suppose, my mentor. This practice of not trusting something by its surface was his very mode of being. He trusted nothing, but there was some value in this habit, for it had patently kept him alive for a very long time. A peculiarly long time.

It defined him too, for I did not know what he was any more than I knew

what I was. He told me he was an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos, but another man, who claimed to hold that title with equal insistence, told me that Eisenhorn was, in fact, a renegade. Worse, a heretic. Worse, *Extremis Diabolus*. But perhaps that man – Ravenor, his name – perhaps *he* was the liar.

I knew so very little, I did not even know if *Eisenhorn* knew what he was. I wondered if he was like me, bewildered by the way the truth of the world could shift so suddenly. I thought I was an orphan, raised in the scholam of the Maze Undue to serve as an agent of the Ordos. But now it seemed I was a... a genetic copy and not an orphan at all. I have – *had* – no parents. There was no dead mother and father for me to mourn, though I had mourned and missed them my whole life, for they were a fabrication, just like the story of their tombstone in the marshland cemetery.

And I had been told the Maze Undue was not an Ordo scholam, but in fact an academy, run by a hermetic society called the Cognitae, which was of ancient standing, and served as a shadow-twin of the Inquisition.

I was expected now to decide my loyalty. Should I serve the Cognitae that bred me, or the Holy Ordos that I always believed I was a part of? Did I throw my lot in with Eisenhorn, who might be a servant of the Hallowed Throne, or a thrice-damned heretic? Did I turn to Ravenor, who claimed Imperial authority, yet may be the biggest liar of all?

And what of the other parties in this game? Not the least of them, the King in Yellow? Should I stand at *his* side?

I was resolved, for now, to walk with Gregor Eisenhorn. This, despite the fact he consorted with daemonhosts and a warrior of the Traitor Legions, and had been denounced to me for a heretic.

Why? Because of all the things I have just said. I trusted nothing. Not even Gregor Eisenhorn. But I was in his company and he had, I felt, been the most open with me.

I had my own principles, of course. Though it was done underhand by the Cognitae, I was raised to believe my destiny was to serve the Throne. That, at least, felt right. I knew I would rather pledge to the God-Emperor of us all than to any other power or faction. Where I would ultimately stand, I could not say, for, as I have stated, I could not identify any truth that could be relied on. At least in Eisenhorn's company I might learn some truths upon which I could base a decision, even if it was, in the end, to quit his side and join another.

I wished to learn, to make *true learning*, not the dissembling education of the Maze Undue. I wished to learn the truth about myself, and what part I played in the greater scheme of mystery. More than that, I wished to unravel the secrets of Queen Mab, and lay them bare to light, for plainly an existential menace lurked in the shadows of the world, and exposing it would be the greatest duty I could perform in the name of the God-Emperor.

These things I wished, though, as I came to reflect later, one must be careful what one wishes for. Nevertheless, revelation of the *entire truth*, in all clarity, was the purpose I had privately vowed to accomplish. Which is why, that cold night, I was Violetta Flyde, and I walked through the streets of Feygate Quarter at Eisenhorn's side to attend a meeting at the Lengmur Salon.

Yes, I know. Violetta Flyde was yet another veil, an untrue name, a false me, a role to play, something that the tutors of the Maze Undue used to call a *function*. But illumination might be earned from the play-acting, so I walked then, and for the time being, at Eisenhorn's side.

Also, I was fond of his daemon.

Cherubael was cordial. He called me 'little thing', and though he polluted my dreams, I fancied he was the most honest of my companions. It was as though he had nothing left to lose, and thus honesty would cost him nothing. There was no side to him.

Not all found him so bearable. Lucrea, a girl who I had brought with me into Eisenhorn's care, left after a short time. She slipped away into the streets one night, without a goodbye, and I am sure it was the daemonhost's company that had finally driven her away, despite all she had seen till then. But Lucrea had never been part of the intrigue, just a bystander. I could not blame her for wanting to be out of it.

Cherubael was a daemon, a thing of the immaterium, shackled inside a human body. I think the body had been dead for a long time. His true self, inside, stretched at his outer casing as if trying to get out. The shape of horns pushed at the skin of his brow, as though some forest stag or scree-slope ram was striving to butt its way out of him. This pulled taut the bloodless flesh of his face, giving him an unintentional sneer, an upturned nose, and eyes that blinked oddly and too seldom. I wondered sometimes if he would burst one day, and there would be nothing left but sprouting antlers and a grinning skull.



He was quite terrifying, but I found the fact of him reassuring. If he was a daemon, then such things existed. And Queen Mab constantly demonstrated that there was symmetry in all things: dead and alive, materia and immateria, truth and lies, name and false name, faithful and faithless, light and dark, inner and outer. So if he was a daemon, then surely there had to be angels too? Cherubael, cursed and wretched, was my proof that angels existed.

And perhaps, in time, one would come to me and fill my dreams with amber sap, and let me see things, golden and clear, for what they actually were.

‘One may measure a city,’ Eisenhorn remarked as we walked, ‘by the number of metaphysical societies it harbours.’

‘One may measure a circle,’ I replied, ‘starting anywhere.’

He looked at me, puzzled.

‘Your point?’

‘It’s still a circle,’ I said. ‘No start, no finish. Infinite.’

‘Yes. And this is still a city.’

‘Is it, though?’ I asked.

I was in a playful mood, and he didn’t care for it. He meant, of course, the temperament and health of a city. A city in decline, one leaning towards corruption and malady of spirit, becomes home to curious beliefs. An interest in *the other* grows. This is basic Ordo teaching. A fashion for the occult and esoteric, a preponderance of fringe interests, these are the symptoms of a culture in dangerous deterioration.

If you do not know the city, the Lengmur Salon lies in a hollow of old streets beneath the flaking spire of Saint Celestine Feygate, whose bells chime at odd hours. On this night, upon the broad steps before the templum, many of the poor wretches known as the Curst loitered, begging for alms. I could not help but look to see if Renner Lightburn was among them. In the months since we had been separated, I had thought of him often, and wondered what fate had befallen him, for no trace of him could be found anywhere.

Nor was there trace here. Eisenhorn noticed my look, but made no comment. Though Lightburn had been brave and selfless during his time with me, his mind had been wiped by Ravor’s agents and he had been returned, mystified, to the streets. Eisenhorn believed I was better off without him and, most certainly, that Lightburn was better off without me.

Still, I had never had the chance to thank him.

All around that small, muddled quarter of Feygate there were salons, dining halls and meeting houses that were popular haunts for those of a metaphysical bent. I saw placards on the walls and notices in windows advertising spiritual lectures, quizzing glasses and table-turning evenings, or opportunities to hear noted speakers orate on many matters esoteric, such as 'Man's place in the Cosmos,' or 'The Secret Architecture of the Queen Mab Templums,' or 'The Hidden Potency of Numbers and Letters'. Several establishments advertised the reading of taroche, by appointment, and others promised spiritual healing and past-life revelation that would be delivered by expert practitioners.

The Lengmur Salon, its old windows glowing gold in the deepening evening, stood foremost among these. It was the meeting place of souls artistically and mystically inclined. It was said the celebrated poet Crookley dined here regularly, and that often he might be found drinking with the engraver Aulay or the beautiful opera singer Comena Den Sale. The place was famous for its lectures, both formal and informal, and its readings and performative events, as well as the provocative dialogues that flowed between the eclectic clientele.

'On another world,' Eisenhorn muttered as he held the door open for me, 'this place would have been closed by the Magistratum. By the Ordos. This whole district.'

There is a fine line, I believe, between what is permissible and what is not. The Imperium loves its lore and its mysteries, and there is always active interest in what might be considered fringe ideas. However, it is but a short step from those harmless and jolly diversions to outright heresy. Queen Mab, and establishments like this, teetered on that edge. There was an air of the occult to it, by which I mean the old definition of the word, the hidden and the unseen. It felt as though real secrets lay here, and true mysteries were discussed, mysteries beyond the innocuous fripperies and trifles tolerated on more upstanding worlds.

Queen Mab, indeed the whole world of Sancour, had slid into unwise, bohemian decay, falling from the strict and stern grasp of Imperial control into a state of end-times dissolution, which would only end in its decadent demise, or in a hasty and overdue purge by off-world authorities.

But the salon, ah such a place! Facing the street was its famous dining hall, a large, bright room that rang with the clatter of flatware and chatter of the

customers. The place was packed, and people queued outside to get a supper-table.

Behind the hall and the kitchens lay the salon itself, a back-bar accessible by doors in the side lanes and through a curtained archway at the rear of the dining hall. This was the heart of the establishment. It was fusty, I would say, if you have never visited it, lit by old lumen globes in tinted glass hoods, the walls papered with an opulent pattern of black fern-leaves on a purple field. There was a long bar to the back, the heavy wood of it painted a dark green and ribbed with brass bands. The main space was filled with tables, and there were side booths around which black drapes could be drawn for private assignations.

The place was busy, thronging with patrons, many of whom had come through from the dining room to take a digestif after their supper. The air was full of voices and the waft of obscura smoke, but it was not lively, like a city tavern, or the busy dining hall without. There was a reserve here, a languor, as though these conversations were slow and involved matters of philosophy rather than the empty blather of drinkers finding evening recreation. Servitors, worked in brass and robed in green, weaved through the throng, serving trays of drinks and platters of food.

We took a booth to the side from where we could observe a decent part of the lounge. A servitor brought us joiliq in small, patterned glasses, and small plates of griddled gannek smeared with mustard, and kethfruit flesh dipped in salt.

We watched.

I was intrigued by the clientele and their heady conversations.

‘Is that Crookley?’ I asked, eyeing a heavysset man who was sitting beneath a painting of the Tetrachtys, locked in conversation with a small woman in grey.

‘No,’ Eisenhorn replied. ‘Crookley is taller, less meat on him.’

I am skilled at observation. It was part of my training. While caring to maintain the role of the prim young lady Violetta Flyde, I scanned the crowd, noting this visage and that, seeing whom I might recognise, and who it might be useful to recognise on another day. I saw a bearded caravan master from the Herrat, holding forth with three men – one who seemed to be a meek scholam master, another who was clearly a humble rubricator from his ink-stained hands, and a third who would not have seemed out of place at the head of a Heckaty Parish killgang.

At another table, three nurse-sisters from the Feygate Lazarhouse sat in silence, sharing a bottle of mint wine, identical in their tight-belted grey serge habits and white coifs. They did not speak or look at each other, and their tired faces read blank. I wondered if they were here by mistake, or if this was simply their nearest hostelry, and they tolerated the decadent society each evening for the sake of a restorative drink.

Beside the bar stood an elderly man with quite the longest arms and legs I have seen. He gangled awkwardly, as if he had never quite mastered the lengths to which his skinny frame had grown. He was dressed in a dark tailcoat and trousers, and peered through a silver pince-nez as he scribbled in a notebook. Alongside him at the bar, but apparently not of the elderly man's company, for they exchanged no words, sat a small, sad old man who was evidently blind. He sipped at drinks that the bartender slid into his grasp so he might find them.

I noted many others. I noted, too, any indication of weapons on their persons: a bulging pocket here, an underbelt there, a stiffness of posture that hinted at a concealed knife-girdle or disguised holster. I had no expectation that the evening would turn untoward, but if it did, I had already mapped the dangers, and knew from which directions threats would come.

Just before the lights started to flash, I saw two people at the side door, talking urgently. One was a young gentleman of means in a pinstriped suit and over-robe. The other was a woman in a rust-coloured gown. I was drawn by the quiet animation of their conversation. Though I could not hear the words, their manner was somewhat agitated, as if some serious personal matter was being discussed that was quite different in tone from the meandering debate in the rest of the salon.

The woman made a gesture of refusal, then turned to leave by the side door. The man took her arm – gently – to dissuade her, but she shook him off and stepped out. As she passed beneath the low lamp of the side door, I saw her profile, and felt at once that I knew her from somewhere.

But then she was out, and gone into the street, and the salon lights were flashing on and off.

Gurlan Lengmur, the patron of the establishment, stepped up onto the small stage and nodded to the barman, who ceased flicking the light switches now that attention and quiet had been achieved.

‘My friends,’ said Lengmur, ‘welcome to this evening’s diversion.’

His voice was soft and buttery. He was a small man, refined and well

dressed, but otherwise quite bland in appearance, a fact that seemed to bother him, for his dark hair was shaved on the right side and then turned over long on the crown in a huge, oil-dressed lick as the latest society fashion prescribed. I felt he had embraced this modern style less because it was modish and more because it afforded his person some specific feature of interest.

‘There will be taroche later, in the back room,’ he said, ‘and then a talk by Master Edvark Nadrach on the significance of the Uraeon and the Labyrine in Early Angelican tomb sites. Those of you who have heard Master Nadrach’s talks before will know to expect a riveting and educational treat. Afterwards, then, an open discussion. First, though, on this small stage, Mamzel Gleena Tontelle, the feted voicer, will share her mediumship with us.’

There was a warm round of applause, and some clinking of butter knives against the rims of glassware. Lengmur stepped back, extending a gesture of welcome as he bowed his head, and handed up onto the foot-stage a dowdy woman in a pearl-grey silk dress of a style that had been out of fashion for some decades.

Her plump face was pinched. I guessed her age to be about fifty years. She accepted the amiable applause with a nod and a gentle sweep of her hand.

‘Her dress,’ Eisenhorn whispered. ‘Styled old to remind us of generations past. A common trick.’

I nodded. Mamzel Tontelle indeed looked like a society lady from the glittering ballrooms of the previous century, a time when Queen Mab had been a grander place. I had seen such things in pict-books. Even her mannerisms had something of the old-fashioned about them. This was an act, a role, and I had a great interest in those who performed roles well. She had, I think, applied some costuming powder to her skin and dress.

‘Powdered like a ghost,’ Eisenhorn grumbled. ‘Voicers call it “phantomiming”, and it’s yet another stale conceit.’

Mam Tontelle had done herself up like some mournful shade, the light powder making it seem as though she had stood, unmoving, through the passage of decades as dust settled upon her. It was understated and, for my part, I thought it most amusing.

She clasped one hand to the shelf of her bosom and spread the fingers of the other across her brow, furrowing in concentration.

‘There is a boy here,’ she said. ‘A small boy. I see the letter “H”.’

In the crowd, some shaking of heads.

‘Definitely a boy,’ Mamzel Tontelle continued. Her voice was thin and colourless. ‘And the letter “H”. Or perhaps a “T”.’

‘Cold reading,’ muttered Eisenhorn. ‘The oldest trick of all. Fishing for reception.’

And of course it was. I saw it for what it was, and shared Eisenhorn’s scepticism, but not his disdain. I had always been charmed by such distractions, and was entertained to watch an actor at work. More so, a trickster who was, through performance, fabricating something out of nothing.

Mam Tontelle tried another letter, a ‘G’, as I remember, and a man at the back took her up on it, and presently had become convinced that he was receiving a message from his godson, long dead. The man was quite astounded by this, though he had provided all the facts that had made it convincing, offering them innocently in response to Mam Tontelle’s deft suggestion.

‘He was young when he died. But ten years old.’

‘Eight,’ the man replied, eyes bright.

‘Yes, I see it. Eight years. And drowned, poor soul.’

‘He fell under a cart,’ the man sighed.

‘Oh, the cart! I hear the rattle of it. It was not water upon the poor child’s lips, but blood. He loved so a pet, a hound or—’

‘A bird,’ murmured the man, ‘a little tricefinch in a silver cage. It could sing the song of the bells at Saint Martyr’s.’

‘I see the silver bars, and bright feathers too,’ said Mam Tontelle, hand to head as if in exquisite pain from a migraine, ‘and so it sings...’

And so it continued. The man was beside himself, and the crowd much impressed. I could tell Eisenhorn was quickly losing patience. But we had not come to watch the voicer ply her tricks, nor had we come to hear a lecture or have our taroche read.

We were here to find an astronomer who had either gone mad, or had seen a great secret that many in the city would kill to learn.

Or possibly both.

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*Affectionately inscribed to Vincent Rospond and likewise those of the House Rospond, in gratitude for the years of kindness, support and duty.*

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